

Chapter Eight

“Old Vivaldi or the *Prete Rosso*” – The Composer’s Last Decade (1732–1741)

Regardless of the success or failure of Vivaldi’s travels from 1729 to 1731, the end of this period marked a turning point in the composer’s career. He became used to the ideas of staying in Venice and of orienting his career toward the possibilities his native city offered him and the projects he could undertake from Venice (figs. 40 and 41). Vivaldi began a relatively settled period, interrupted at most by the few opera productions – in Mantua, Verona, Florence, and Treviso – mounted outside Venice. Almost a decade went by before the *prete rosso*, then sixty-two, decided to leave Venice in the spring of 1740 and risk a complete change in his life.

Even if one attempts to consider Vivaldi’s situation during the 1730s without knowing about the final part of his life, it is impossible not to note that, on the whole, his fame declined during this period. To be sure, he was still “the famous Vivaldi” who continued to fill “almost half the world” with his concertos, but the time was past when he had established and spread his fame; he was past the zenith of his career. We have no way of knowing to what degree and at what point Vivaldi began to feel this, though one assumes that he may have begun to sense his declining fame during his travels in *Germania*. The events surrounding

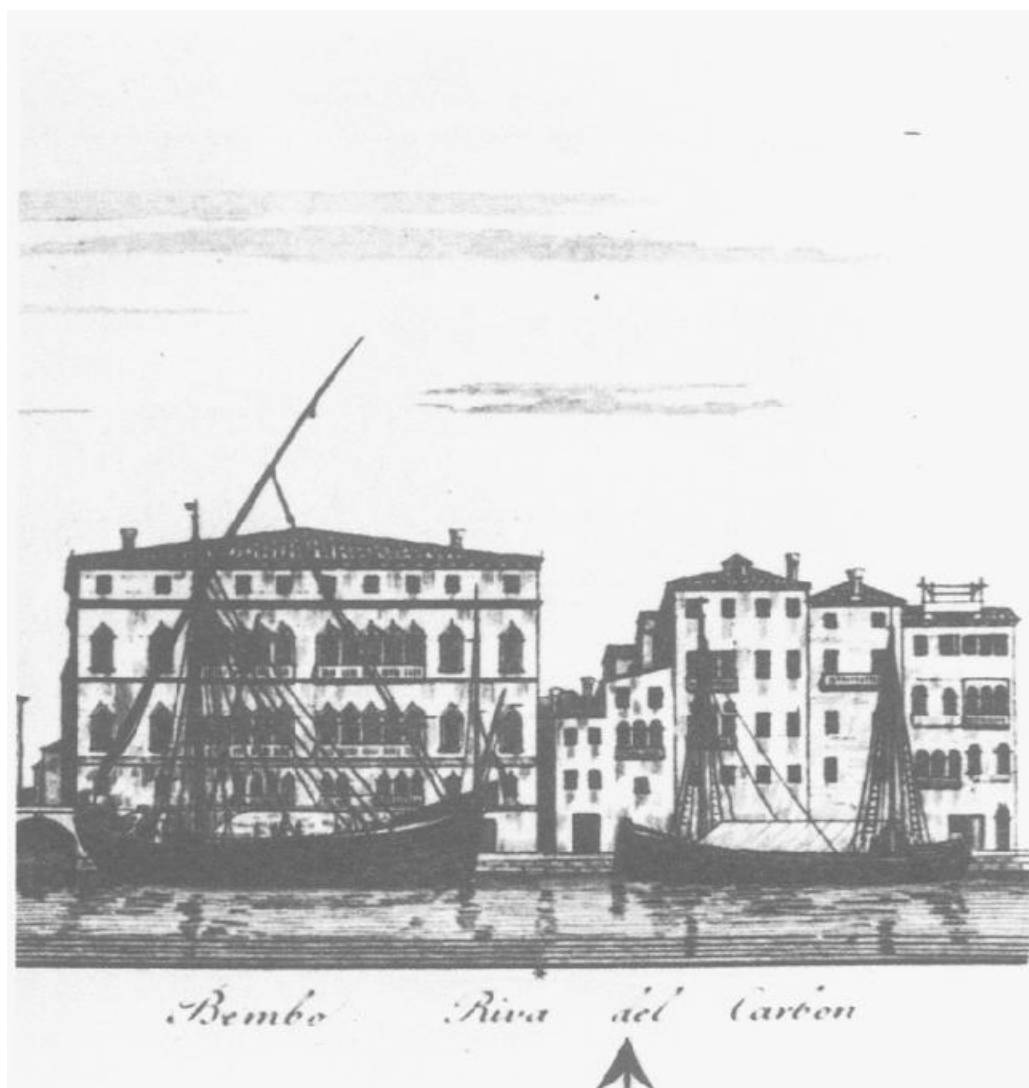


Figure 40. Vivaldi's last house in Venice (1731–1740) (see arrow). Engraving by Antonio Quadri (1828).

his operatic endeavors in Ferrara, between autumn 1736 and Carnival 1739, must have made it clear to him that his prestige as a musician was vanishing, indeed that it was gone.

The main biographical reference points for the 1730s are opera productions, and it is also primarily and most clearly in this area that one finds his reputation as a composer reflected. I would like to recall here (see chap. 5) only a few salient facts of Vivaldi's operatic career. Especially conspicuous is the fact that Vivaldi no longer had regular ties to any Venetian opera house and was no longer able to maintain his influence there. His work with the Teatro Sant'Angelo, which he had dominated for many years as impresario and house composer, ceased for four



Figure 41. Vivaldi's last house in Venice (1730–1740), present condition.

years following his three premieres in the autumn of 1733 and Carnival 1734. It was not until Carnival 1738 that another two Vivaldi operas and a *pasticcio* arranged by him were performed there. During this lull he filled two opera commissions (spring and autumn 1735) – in addition to possible intermezzo commissions – for the Grimani theater of San Samuele; these operas did not, however, result in a continuing association with the theater. The only theater outside Venice with which he occasionally collaborated was the Teatro Filarmonico in Verona, where Vivaldi produced the opening opera, *La fida ninfa*, in January 1732, a new opera and a *pasticcio* during Carnival 1735, and another new opera during spring 1737. Earlier, I described his failed attempts, accompanied by serious artistic and personal defeats, to establish himself in Ferrara as an opera composer.

The number of new operas and *pasticci*, at least thirteen, that Vivaldi produced after 1732 is still substantial, though the new works are mostly concentrated in the period up to January 1736, with a peak – four operas and one *pasticcio* – between Carnival 1735 and Carnival 1736. Subsequently, the Venetian produced only three new operas and one *pasticcio*. Vivaldi's last documented work for the stage is the opera *Feraspe*, performed in November 1739 at the Sant'Angelo.

We have only sporadic information about how these late operas were received by audiences. Vivaldi reported that a series of performances of *Catone in Utica* in Verona, in spring 1737, was successful, while a revival of *Siroe* in Ferrara, to begin the 1739 Carnival, turned out to be a total failure. Quite apart from these surviving notices, the operas must not have enjoyed more than brief local success. They did not make their way into leading opera houses. The fact that the operas were launched in secondary theaters is in part responsible, though their limited popularity was largely due to the scores themselves – not owing to the artistic quality of the music as such, but to its backwardness with respect to the trends of the new Neapolitan style of Hasse's generation. *La fida ninfa*, *L'Olimpiade*, and *La Griselda*, the only operas from the 1730s that we have in their entirety, must have been well above the average levels of musical inspiration and effectiveness of opera productions of the times, but they did not give audiences the wide-arching, supple vocal melody they loved and found in the operas of Johann Adolph Hasse.

There is reliable evidence that Vivaldi knew how effective this new operatic style was – it was no accident that his late *pasticci* increasingly

contained music by such composers as Giacomelli, Hasse, and Leo. The situation was driven home to him during the 1737 Ferrara Carnival *stagione*, in which he had to revive two Hasse operas in place of his own, originally scheduled, *Ginevra* and *L' Olimpiade*.

The sources say nothing about Vivaldi's relationship with the Ospedale della Pietà during the early 1730s. There are no remaining minutes of the governing board from between February 1729 and February 1733, but since the ledgers do not record any payments, it would seem that the composer did not work for the Pietà at the time. He was not regularly employed as *maestro* during 1733 and 1734 and was not re-employed until 5 August 1735. On that day, the *congregazione* of the Pietà voted eight to two (with three abstentions) to appoint Vivaldi *maestro de' concerti*. His duties consisted of supplying the Pietà with "concertos and compositions for all types of instruments" and of being available "as frequently as necessary" to teach the girls and rehearse works.¹ His annual payment was one hundred ducats.

The reasons why the *prete rosso* now returned to regular employment with a fixed annual sum, unlike in the 1723 settlement, remain to be seen, though clearly his terms were now less advantageous. According to the agreement of 2 July 1723 Vivaldi earned twenty-four sequins (about eighty-five ducats) a year merely for supplying two concertos per month, and he was obliged to lead only three to four rehearsals when he was in Venice. The 1735 decision, however, assumed a permanent presence in Venice and obligated him to teach and to hold rehearsals "as frequently as necessary". The annual salary of one hundred ducats also seems to have been anything but commensurate with Vivaldi's reputation – it was the same sum he had been paid as a beginning musician when he entered the Pietà in 1704.

Vivaldi worked for two full years under the conditions stipulated in the employment decision of summer 1735. After he had been confirmed unanimously in 1736 and with only one "no" vote in 1737, he obtained a mere seven/four vote in his favor at the governing board's vote of 28 March 1738, thereby losing his post as *maestro* for the third time in his career at the Pietà (the first two occasions were in 1709 and 1716).

Vivaldi's loss of his regularly paid position did not, however, mean the end of his relations with the Pietà; indeed he was employed for special tasks until the spring of the year when he left Venice. He was charged with composing church music because the *maestro di coro* posi-

tion had been vacant for almost two years after Giovanni Porta had departed in September 1737. Vivaldi was one of the interim, composers who wrote sacred vocal works until Gennaro d'Alessandro was appointed to the post in August 1739. Two fee payments to Vivaldi in spring 1739 along with works or new versions of works from this period are proof of this activity. The payments were for “six psalms with antiphons and six motets” (14 April) and for five motets and nine “concertos and sonatas” (27 May). For these he received seventy-four ducats twelve grossi (twenty-one sequins) and fifty ducats (fourteen sequins).² We do not know which works the payments were for.

I will mention here only the few large vocal works verifiably written for the Pietà and datable from the composer's last years in Venice. The works in question are the RV 611 version of the Magnificat in G Minor and the psalm setting for double chorus, “Lauda Jerusalem” (RV 609). Both scores bear the names of the vocal soloists: Margarita, Julietta, Fortunata, and Chiaretta for the soprano parts in “Lauda Jerusalem;” Apollonia, Bolognese, Ambrosina, Albetta, and, again, Chiaretta, for the solo parts in the Magnificat. All these girls also performed in the serenata performance of 21 March 1740. It is especially interesting from a performance practice point of view that the solo soprano parts in “Lauda Jerusalem” (one each in the *Primo Coro* and *Secondo Coro*) were both sung by *two* girls.

The governors of the Pietà also availed themselves of the *prete rosso* when they prepared a special musical event in March 1740: a gala concert in honor of the visiting Saxon prince-electors Frederick Christian, son of Elector Frederick August II, who had been similarly feted in Venice twenty-five years earlier. Musical homages of this sort were hardly unusual for the Pietà, though it would seem that the institution this time spared no expense or energy to provide a fitting tribute to the eighteen-year-old prince. The elaborate, festive program, entitled *L'Adria festosa*,³ is the kind of publication printed for only truly extraordinary events. (A visit by Prince Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria, brother of Elector Karl Albert – later Emperor Charles VII – during Carnival 1737, for example, received far less attention.) In order to honor him the Pietà performed a Vivaldi serenata, “Egloga pescatoria”, entitled *Il Mopso* (RV 691), but the only remaining information about this performance comes from a 1755 opera catalog and from the notes of a

nineteenth-century Italian musicologist.⁴ According to these notes, Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria praised the performance highly and honored the composer with gifts.

The concert that the Pietà held on 21 March 1740 to honor Prince-Elector Frederick Christian, who had been staying in the city since December 1739, was the first of three similar musical homages the Venetian ospedali dedicated to the royal visitor from Saxony; the performance at the Pietà was followed one week later by one at the Ospedale degli Incurabili, and on 4 April it was the Mendicanti's turn. Understandably, the three institutions tried to outdo one another not only in musical offerings but also in festive and imaginative scenery design as well. For the Pietà concert the hall was decorated "with gold brocade and magnificent damask with frills, with candle-holding crystal chandeliers, and with numerous great torches"; "the canal leading from the Riva to the aforementioned holy place was illuminated by torches", and for the performance of the homage serenata, *Il coro delle muse*, by Carlo Goldoni (libretto) and Gennaro d'Alessandro (music) a "beautiful stage with a pleasing set piece showing the choir of muses" was erected.

Unlike the performances at the Incurabili and at the Mendicanti, the festive concerts of the Pietà consisted mostly of instrumental music, since the orchestra and its excellent soloists were long considered the highlights of the house, that is, the obligatory serenata was the center of the program – with nine young Ospedale singers as the muses – but the most important musical part of the program was instrumental, featuring Vivaldi's concertos exclusively. For the occasion, the *prete rosso* composed four works, which were performed on the evening of 21 March by the girls of the Pio Ospedale della Pietà: the richly scored C Major *Concerto con molti Istromenti* (RV 558) featuring rare instruments, the Concerto for Solo Violin in A Major (RV 552) (with a second violin as "a distant echo"), the Double Concerto for Viola d'Amore and Lute in D Minor (RV 540), and the Sinfonia for Strings and Basso Continuo in G Major (RV 149). Moreover, the scores of all four works were bound in presentation copies and presented to the prince-electoral together with a dedication manuscript. This volume of eighty-three folios bearing the title *Concerti con molti Istromenti* found its way into the private music collection of the Saxon electors and has been one

of the especially prized pieces of Dresden Vivaldiana for many years (fig. 42).⁵ This source is all the more valuable because the presentation scores of the Concerto for Viola d'Amore and Lute and for the sinfonia were written by the composer himself, and these two scores are the last known Vivaldi autographs of any type (fig. 43). Interestingly enough, on the calligraphic title page of the manuscript Vivaldi still calls himself *maestro de concerti* of the Ospedale, although he was no longer employed in this position.

Despite the abundant information about the musical soiree at the Pietà in honor of Frederick Christian, there are still a number of gaps. Did Vivaldi present the manuscripts to the Dresden prince personally? Was there personal contact between the musician and the scion of the court that had been one of the Vivaldi bastions for a number of years? But most of all, could Vivaldi, who must have already been planning to leave Venice, have used the dedication with other ends in mind?

Frederick Christian's travel journal contains no answers to these questions, the name Vivaldi does not appear. Still, the prince wrote a few sentences about the evening: the performance of the "cantata written expressly for me" was very successful, "but it is the musical instruments, which are truly excellent and much rarer because they are all



Figure 42. Title page of the 1740 manuscript volume dedicated to Prince-Elector Frederick Christian.



Figure 43. Opening of the Concerto for Viola d'Amore and Lute (RV 540) in the 1740 autograph score.

played by women without a single man, that make this hospital famous. The last concerto for two violins was very pretty”.⁶

Events such as the festive concert for Frederick Christian must have been rather infrequent during Vivaldi's last years. Apart from the aforementioned serenatas for Ferdinand Maria of Bavaria, we know of no enterprise of real importance during the composer's late life. Until recently, it was believed that Vivaldi undertook a major trip to attend the centennial of the Amsterdam Stadsschouwburg in January 1738, but a recent examination of sources has excluded the possibility of Vivaldi's personal participation in the celebration at the Amsterdam Municipal Theater on 7 January 1738.⁷ All that remains is the fact that the large festival concert (with works by, among others, Agrell, de Fesch, Chintzer, and Sammartini) opened with a concerto by Vivaldi. The concerto in question was not a new work, but an arrangement (RV 562a) of the Concerto in D Major “per la solennità di San Lorenzo”, which was probably written about twenty-five years earlier. The Amsterdam version added timpani.

Vivaldi published no works after his second series of collections, which came out between 1725 and 1729 (Opp. 8 to 12). This is true if we refer to printed collections with opus numbers that were put together or authorized by the composer, such as the concerto and sonata sets Opp. 1 to 12. Perhaps this category also includes six cello sonatas published in Paris by Le Clerc le Cadet in 1740 (RV 47, 41, 43, 45, 40, and 46), although it is likely, in this case as well, that the composer did not have a hand in preparing the edition. We are sure that the same applies to a collection published in Paris in 1737 (by Madame Boivin) entitled *Il pastor fido*, containing six *Sonates pour la Musette, Vièle, Flute, Hautbois, Violin, avec la Basse Continue* (RV 54–59, called Op. 13), and consisting of concerto movement arrangements (of Vivaldi, Meck, and Alberti) and some original movements. The instruments listed in the title are intended as alternative instruments, the scoring being for one melody instrument and continuo. It has recently been proved⁸ that these arrangements were made by the Paris musician and instrument maker Nicolas Chédeville. Chédeville is also the author of the 1739 collection entitled *Le Printems ou les Saisons amusantes concertos d'Antonio Vivaldi...*, which consists of arrangements of six Italian instrumental concertos, including Vivaldi's *La primavera* (RV 269).

Vivaldi made unmistakably clear to a foreign visitor why he did not publish new collections of works. He had a conversation on 13 February 1733 with the English scholar Edward Holdsworth, who reported to his friend and Vivaldi admirer Charles Jennens in a letter written that same day that Vivaldi said that “he had resolved not to publish any more concertos, because it prevents him from selling his compositions in manuscript, which he thinks will turn more to account”. The passage concerning Vivaldi's prices that follows is especially interesting, “as certainly it would if he finds a good market because he expects a guinea for every piece. Perhaps you might deal with him if you were here to choose what you like, but I am sure I shall not venture to choose for you at that price”.⁴

To understand Holdsworth's reaction, it is necessary to know that a guinea was worth about fifty lire at the time, that is, about two sequins six lire. At that price it is evident that on the free market Vivaldi charged more than twice what the Pietà paid him, which was one sequin per concerto. Certainly this is an example of the musician's keen business sense, which we have seen elsewhere. This quality also shows

the special conditions Vivaldi faced as a musician in Venice. He held a regular position for only part of his career, essentially the first half, which assured him a fixed, albeit insufficient, income. He was essentially a free-lance artist subject to all the risks and demands of the music world, which was already largely subject to middle class market laws. His only possibility of creating and guaranteeing for himself a seemingly existence under such conditions was to insure that the success of and demand for his works could be translated into material gain.

Vivaldi was certainly an artist who also understood this side of his profession, and his extraordinary position and popularity as a composer of concertos permitted him to charge unusually high fees. This is again confirmed by an account by French scholar and music lover Charles de Brosses (later the first president of the Dijon Parliament), in probably the most important document, dated August 1739, of the composer's final years in Venice. De Brosses's *Lettres historiques et critiques sur l'Italie*, the result of his Italian travels, contain extremely perceptive remarks about music in that country. The material about Vivaldi, contained in the letter dated 29 August 1739, also refers to the composer's business sense: "Vivaldi has become very friendly with me", de Brosses wrote, "in order to sell me some concertos at a very high price. He has succeeded in part".¹⁰

The same letter contains the only contemporary source to confirm Vivaldi's fading star in Venice. "To my great amazement", the observant visitor to Venice states, "I have found that he is not as appreciated here as he deserves, for fashion is everything in Venice, where his works have been heard for too long and where last year's music makes no money. The current man of the day is the famous 'Sassone' (Hasse)".

The sixty-two-year-old composer must have decided to leave Venice because of this situation. The first document indicating that Vivaldi planned to leave the city is the voting record of the Pietà governors of 29 April 1740¹¹. The resolution concerned the acquisition of a large number of Vivaldi concertos because of the necessity of purchasing such concertos to maintain the ensemble's reputation and because of the composer's intention to leave Venice. "The honorable Vivaldi" had set aside "a certain number of concertos" ["una certa portione de concerti"] for sale, and the proposed price per concerto was one sequin. Though there were two ballots, the required majority was not reached that day. A payment of seventy ducats twenty-three grossi (twenty

sequins) made to Vivaldi on 12 May 1740 proves that the Pietà finally approved his offer. Three days earlier, on 9 May, Vivaldi had received fifteen ducats twenty-three grossi for three concertos and one sinfonia – most probably the performance material of the four works performed at the festive concert for Frederick Christian.

The receipts dated 9 and 12 May are the last entries concerning Vivaldi in the Pietà ledger and the last proof of his presence in Venice. When Vivaldi received a summons to testify before court, on 24 May, his neighbors stated that he was “outside the city” (“fuori della terra”).¹² This would seem to indicate that Vivaldi left Venice between 12 and 24 May. We then lose the composer’s track for no less than nine months – until 7 February of the following year, when we have the first proof of his presence in Vienna. We do not know when he arrived in there, nor do we know where he visited between the two cities. The main uncertainty, however, is Vivaldi’s reason for traveling to Vienna and whether the city was his original final destination. Similar to his travels to *Germania* ten years before, we can only speculate about why he went.

Understandably, the Habsburg court and Vivaldi’s patron Charles VI are regularly mentioned in these conjectures, yet the assumption that Vivaldi had a real chance at the time to be appointed court orchestra director in Vienna is not convincing. This does not mean that Vivaldi did not hope to find patronage and commissions at court, and we should not discount the possibility that his situation in Vienna would have been radically different had Charles VI not died in the autumn of 1740. With the emperor’s death and with the beginning of the War of Austrian Succession (1740–1748), the composer must have ceased counting on the Austrian court for help.

All the information we currently possess seems to indicate that Vivaldi was hoping to realize opera projects north of the Alps, for public not court theaters. The first indication in this direction has to do with the opera company of Pietro and Angelo Mingotti. The Mingotti brothers, whose opera company had originated in Venice, were the first to tour Austria and Germany from their base in Italy. The troupe had been performing in Graz since 1736 and engaged Vivaldi’s prima donna and companion, Anna Girò, during the 1739–1740 season. Performances were held in the city’s first public theater, the wooden “Theater am Tummelplatz” built by Pietro Mingotti. Girò, who had last performed

in Italy in Ferrara in the *Siroe* revival that opened the 1739 Carnival season, appeared in five opera productions between spring 1739 and Carnival 1740. Two of these works, *Catone in Utica* and *Rosmira*, were probably Vivaldi's settings of 1737 and 1738; some of the other titles of the operas performed by the Mingotti company (*Ipermestra*, *Farnace*, *Siroe*, and *Adelaide*) may also be by Vivaldi. The name of the composer of all of the above works is not given in the libretto.

By the time Vivaldi arrived in Graz, the spring *stagione* was about to end or was already over, and in the fall of 1740, as a result of financial difficulties, the Mingottis could not perform in this city. Anna Girò probably left the troupe at the end of the Carnival season. We have no information regarding her whereabouts during subsequent years, though a note, dated 17 February 1742, in a tax file states that she had "traveled to Vienna."¹³ The next proof of her presence in Venice is from 1745. As far as we can determine today, her last Venetian operatic appearance took place at the Teatro San Samuele in 1747.

There is a considerable amount of evidence that Vivaldi's plans and aspirations in Vienna were primarily concentrated on opera projects, specifically for the Kärntnertheater. A number of Vivaldi operas (*Tito Manlio*, *Artabano*, *Il Teuzzone*, *Farnace*, *Candace*, and *Bajazet*) were probably performed at this theater during the 1730s, though we have no concrete proof of this since only the title has survived, not the composer. It is therefore possible that Vivaldi pinned his special hopes on the Kärntnertheater owing to these earlier performances. Two circumstances during Vivaldi's last months in Vienna draw our attention to this theater: the fact that the composer took up lodging very close to the theater (the house in which he died, the "Satlerisch Haus" on the corner of Kärntnerstrasse and Sattlergasse, was only one building away from the theater), and Vivaldi's repeated efforts to gain an audience with an aristocrat who was presumably a patron of that theater. The individual in question was Anton Ulrich of Saxony-Meiningen, at the time co-regent and later sole duke of the small state of Thuringia.¹⁴ The libretto collection of this music- and theater-loving prince and duke (who assembled a rich music collection during his long stay in Vienna) contains the only known libretto of the Vienna performance of Vivaldi's *L'oracolo in Messina*, perhaps the most convincing proof of Vivaldi's personal tie to the Kärntnertheater.¹⁵ *L'oracolo in Messina* was not performed until Carnival 1742 (the libretto states that "La musica è

del fù Sig. D. Antonio Vivaldi” [The music is by the late Signor Don Antonio Vivaldi]), though we have good reason to assume that the performance, for which Vivaldi himself had prepared the ground, may have been originally scheduled for autumn 1740 or Carnival 1741.¹⁶

Only a handful of information about Vivaldi’s brief period in Vienna exists from direct biographical sources, including the documents concerning his death and burial. Sketchy though these documents are, they give a clear indication of the difficult situation of his final months and how abandoned “the famous Vivaldi” was when he died. The first pieces of information are diary entries, dated 7, 8, and 11 February 1741, from Duke Anton Ulrich of Meiningen (fig. 44). As I previously mentioned, they are the first evidence of Vivaldi’s presence in Vienna. There is some obscurity and muddle in these sparse, casual notes, yet they state unmistakably that on two occasions (8 and 11 February) “the composer Vivaldi” was denied an audience with Anton Ulrich. The first time “he was told to come another time ... because I was dictating my diary”, and he notes cursorily on 11 February that “The composer Vivaldi came a second time; I did not speak with him this time either”. His visitor had been successful only on 7 February; the clearly incomplete entry states, “After speaking with old Vivaldi or the *prete rosso*, who...”¹⁷

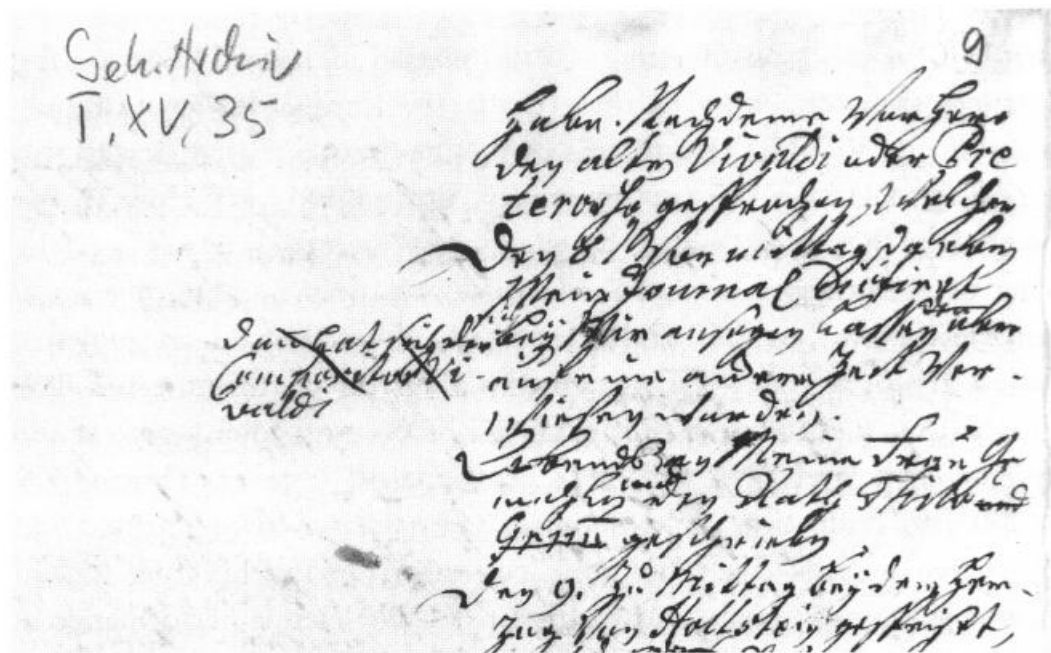


Figure 44. Anton Ulrich of Saxony-Meiningen’s diary entry of 7 February 1741 concerning Vivaldi’s visit.

The next document is a receipt Vivaldi wrote in Vienna on 28 June 1741. In it the composer confirms receiving twelve Hungarian ducats from the secretary of Count Collalto for the sale of an unspecified number of compositions (“*tanta Musica vendutali*”).¹⁸ Vinciguerra Tommaso di Collalto (erroneously called Antonio Vinciguerra in Vivaldi’s receipt), scion of a patrician Venetian family, was lord of Brtnice (Pirnitz) Palace in Moravia. His active patronage of music is attested to by the catalog of a large number of scores from the mid-1700s. Probably the sixteen Vivaldi works contained in this collection (one *sinfonia* and fifteen violin concertos)¹⁹ are the works for which the above receipt was written. If this is the case, however, the price paid per work is appallingly low: about twelve lire or slightly more than half the amount the Pietà paid him (one sequin or twenty-two lire) and not even a fourth of what he had charged foreign buyers for a concerto in 1733. It would seem that only genuine need could have compelled him to sell at this price.

The composer’s death is noted in the official coroner’s report and in the burial account book of St. Stephen’s Cathedral Parish as having occurred on 28 July 1741, exactly one month after the above receipt.

“The Very Reverend Signor Antonio Vivaldi, secular priest”, states the burial account book, died, according to the coroner’s verdict, “of an internal inflammation in Satler’s house by the Kärntner (Carinthia) Gate, aged sixty years, [buried] in the hospital burial ground” (fig. 45).²⁰ What follow are the costs of the burial, held on the same day, a Friday:

Poor bells	2.36
Curates	3.00
Pall	2.15
Parish emblem	0.30
Burial site	2.00
Gravedigger and sexton	1.15
Sacristan	0.30
6 pallbearers with coats	4.30
6 storm lanterns	2.00
6 choirboys	0.54
Bier	0.15
	19.45



Figure 45. The hospital cemetery (Spitaler Gottesacker) in Vienna with chapel and St. Charles Church. Engraving by Salomon Kleiner, 1737.

This entry in the register of deaths gives as much information as we have concerning the composer's death and burial. The remaining available notices – the entries in the death records register and in the “List of Those who Died in Vienna” in the *Wienerisches Diarium* (chronicle) of 2 August 1741²¹ contain less information and are valuable only because they expressly confirm 28 July as the date of death (and not the date of burial), though the possibility still exists that death occurred on the night of 27–28 July. All other details concerning the composer's demise have been lost; the indication of the cause of death (“internal inflammation”) is too vague to enable conjecture about the length and the course of the illness.

Two details about Vivaldi's death that have come down to us merit special attention. The first is a negative one, the fact that Vivaldi is not called musician, composer, or the like in any of the entries; instead he is only designated a secular priest. We have the impression that people had no idea who the deceased was, that those around him in his last surroundings had no inkling of the fame this secular priest enjoyed as a musician. That would coincide with the lack of any public notice of his death.

Second, the cost of his burial is indicative. Although it is not true that, as one often reads in the literature, he was given a “pauper’s burial”, the sum of nineteen florins and forty-five kreutzers would have been sufficient for only the simplest of ceremonies. By way of comparison, the funeral of the Vienna court music director Johann Joseph Fux, who died in February of the same year, cost roughly nine times as much as Vivaldi’s.

The house (Walleris Haus or Satlerisch Haus) where he died, which was owned by the Wahlers (Wallerers), a family of saddlers, no longer exists nor does the burial ground (also called poor sinners’ burial ground), which belonged to the public hospital (Bürgerspital). The cemetery was abandoned at the end of the eighteenth century, while the house, “an ample four-story structure during Vivaldi’s time”, and “a quite good property”,²² was torn down in 1876 to make way for another building.

Despite the many open questions regarding the final period of the composer’s life, without doubt “the famous Vivaldi” died in Vienna impoverished, anonymous, and unnoticed. The composer who “filled almost half the world with his concertos” and who a few years earlier had boasted of “corresponding with nine high princes” was buried in the musical city of Vienna to the pealing of “poor bells”, without the musical world seeming to take the slightest notice. This state of affairs may be due in part to a change in style and taste, and it surely has to do with Vivaldi’s lifestyle, to which the eighteenth-century Venetian chronicler Pietro Gradenigo devoted special attention. He wrote in his *Commemoriali* that “The Abbate D. Antonio Vivaldi, the incomparable violinist known as the red-haired priest, highly esteemed for his concertos and other compositions, earned at one time more than fifty thousand ducats, but his inordinate extravagance caused him to die in poverty, in Vienna”.²³ Yet the real reasons for the way his musical career ended must be sought elsewhere. Vivaldi engaged in the risky undertaking to live as a largely independent musician and man of the theater without ties of service. He could only succeed in this during the long period when he had above average success. He was condemned to failure when his art ceased to arouse an enthusiastic response, and it was precisely in this situation that he set out to start over in new surroundings.

This pronounced will for independence and freedom of movement is an expression of artistic self-assurance and a general trait of Vivaldi’s

personality. Difficult though it is to grasp the musician's character in all its complexity, certain qualities come up repeatedly to betray an irresistible spirit of initiative directed toward self-fulfillment. He was the opposite of the artist who lives and works in peace and solitude; he sought and needed an active link to the public and stimulation through an environment that fed his craving for recognition and success. Limited by a physical ailment, he seems to burst with an inner urge for action, an urge that is surely at the roots of his tendency to write large numbers of works very quickly. He wrote on the score of his opera *Tito Manlio* "Musica del Vivaldi fatta in 5 giorni" (Music by Vivaldi, composed in five days – fig. 46). As late as 1739, Charles de Brosses saw in Vivaldi "a phenomenal passion for composition" ("une furie de composition prodigieuse"). According to de Brosses, the composer offered to "compose a concerto with all its parts faster than a copyist could copy it".²⁴

Many of Vivaldi's manuscripts provide eloquent proof of this "furie de composition". He begins a concerto in a careful, balanced, and



Figure 46. Page one of the autograph score of the opera *Tito Manlio*, with the heading in the composer's hand "Musica del Vivaldi fatta in 5 giorni".

controlled hand, only to quickly shift to a scribble that throws all these good intentions to the wind.

Ludwig Landshoff described this phenomenon, which is evident in the Dresden autograph of the “Pisendel” Concerto, RV 340. (See also fig. 47.)

As the composer grows increasingly agitated his energetic strokes become more cursory from page to page. Clearly, his racing pen was barely able to keep up with the impetuous speed of his inexhaustibly inventive mind. The signatures at the beginning of the lines grow larger and larger, and the baroque curve of the brackets and the tails of the treble clefs reaching down to the next staff become more and more sweeping.²⁵

Liveliness, spontaneity, a temperament marked by dynamism and compulsive vitality were clearly dominant qualities of Vivaldi's person-



Figure 47. Excerpt from the autograph score of the Violin Concerto (RV 205).

ality, a personality that contained winning aspects and appears in positive light. He enjoyed the reputation of being an uncommonly clever businessman. According to Edward Holdsworth, he was vain and he occasionally bent the truth when it served his own interests.²⁶ I have already mentioned examples.

Beyond the general outline I have given above, we still are largely in the dark as to the subtle facets of Vivaldi's personality. Only one account provides a vivid portrait of the musician's personality: Goldoni's description of his encounter with Vivaldi in 1735 (fig. 48). Yet this writer of comedies turns this account into a scene from a play in which the composer is a stock character. This tendency is especially evident in the second version of his description, in his *Mémoires* (Paris, 1787),



Figure 48. Anonymous copperplate engraving of Carlo Goldoni.

which intensifies the earlier telling of 1761 into a caricature. Especially characteristic is the central role played by the prayer book (mentioned in passing in the earlier version) and the exhibition of piety. The following is the *Mémoires* version in its entirety:

His Excellency Grimani, owner of the San Samuele Theater, this year had an opera performed at his expense; and he had me work on this production, as he had promised.

They were not performing a new opera that year; they had chosen *La Griselda*, an opera by Apostolo Zeno and Pariati, who worked together before Zeno left for Vienna to enter the emperor's service, and the composer who was chosen to write the music was Abbé Vivaldi, who is called *Il prete rosso* (the red priest) because of his red hair. He was better known by this nickname than by his family name.

This clergyman, an excellent violinist and middling composer, had taught Mlle. Giraud [Girò] and given her voice training; she was a young singer born in Venice, though the daughter of a French wigmaker. She was not pretty, but she had charms, a very slim waist, beautiful eyes, lovely hair, a charming mouth, and a small voice, but a great deal of acting ability. It was she who was chosen for the part of Griselda.

M. Grimani sent me to the musician's home in order to make the necessary improvements in the opera: to shorten the drama and to change the position and the nature of the arias to suit the wishes of the actors and the composer. Therefore I went to the home of Abbé Vivaldi and presented myself on behalf of His Excellency Grimani. I found Vivaldi surrounded by music and with his breviary in his hand. He got up, made a complete sign of the cross, he put his breviary aside, and made me the usual compliments. "What is the cause of my having the pleasure of seeing you, Monsieur?"

"His Excellency Grimani has entrusted me with the alterations that you think necessary in the opera of the Carnival. I have come to see, Monsieur, what your intentions are."

"Ah! Ah! Are you entrusted, Monsieur, with the alterations in the opera *Griselda*? Then M. Lalli is no longer connected with M. Grimani's theater?"

“M. Lalli, who is very elderly, will always profit from the dedicatory letters and the sale of the librettos, which does not concern me. I have the pleasure of busying myself in work that ought to please me, and I have the honor of being under the direction of M. Vivaldi.”

The Abbé took up his breviary again, made another sign of the cross, and did not answer.

“Monsieur,” I said to him, “I do not wish to distract you in your religious devotions. I shall come back at another time.”

“I am well aware, my dear sir, that you have talent for poetry; I have seen your *Belisario*, which gave me great pleasure. But this is very different. One may be able to create a tragedy or an epic poem, if you please, and not be able to fashion a musical quatrain.”

“Do me the honor, sir, of showing me your drama.”

“Yes, yes, gladly. Where then is *Griselda* tucked away? It was here ... *Deus in adjutorium meum intende ... Domine ... Domine ...* . It was here just now. Ah, here it is. See, Monsieur, this scene between Gualtiere and Griselda; it is an interesting and moving scene. The author has put a pathetic aria at the end, but Mlle. Giraud does not like the pathetic style. She would like a piece with expression and excitement, an aria that expresses emotion by different means, by interrupted words, for example, by heaved sighs, by action and agitation; I don’t know if you understand me.”

“Yes, Monsieur, I quite clearly understand you. Moreover, I have had the honor of hearing Mlle. Giraud and I know that her voice is not very strong.”

“Why, Monsieur, do you insult my pupil? She is good at everything, she sings everything.”

“Yes, Monsieur, you are right. Give me the book and allow me to do it.”

“No, Monsieur, I cannot give it up, I need it, and I am very hard pressed.”

“Very well, Monsieur, if you are in a hurry, give it to me for a moment and I shall accommodate you at once.”

“At once?”

“Yes, Monsieur, at once.”

The Abbé, while scoffing at me, gave me the drama, paper, and a pen and ink, again took up his breviary and recited his psalms and hymns while walking about. I reread the scene, with which I was already acquainted. I recalled what the musician wanted, and in less than a quarter of an hour I wrote down the text for an aria of eight lines divided into two parts. I called the clergyman and showed him my work. Vivaldi read it and smoothed the wrinkles from his brow; he read it again and uttered cries of joy; he threw his prayer book on the ground and summoned Mlle. Giraud. She came.

“Ah,” he said to her, “here is an unusual man, here is an excellent poet. Read this aria. This gentleman has done it right here without hedging and in less than a quarter of an hour,” and coming back to me, he said:

“Ah, Monsieur, I beg your pardon.” And he embraced me and swore that he would never have another poet but me.

He entrusted me with the drama and asked me for additional alterations. He was entirely satisfied with me, and the opera succeeded excellently.²⁷

Gerber's assertion that Vivaldi was “extraordinarily bigoted” and that “he did not let the rosary out of his hand unless he picked up a quill to write an opera”²⁸ is based entirely on this theatrically effective scene from Goldoni's *Memoirs*. Following the German's statement in 1792, older literature constantly repeated this commonplace about the Venetian.

Despite the reservations about Goldoni's description of Vivaldi, it still remains the liveliest depiction of the musician written by a contemporary. It is perhaps no accident that, like Pierleone Ghezzi's sketch (surely the most realistic likeness we have of the composer),²⁹ this portrait is also a caricature. The *prete rosso*, especially the old one, must have provoked it.

