

Chapter Nine

“A Completely New Variety of Musical Pieces for the Time” – Vivaldi’s Achievement and Place in the History of Music

In 1714 when the young Quantz “saw the Vivaldi violin concertos for the first time” he felt them to be a “completely new variety of musical pieces for the time”.¹ We might be tempted to attribute this impression to the German music student’s limited experience, yet Quantz’s statement was made half a century after his early encounter with Vivaldi, beyond any subjective impression, and states an objective fact in the history of music. The type of concerto created by Vivaldi around 1710 was not only a new musical genre, it also embodied a new quality in the development and understanding of instrumental composition in general. The solo concerto created at that time was the first mature, firmly established instrumental form in which compositional principles and stylistic models were no longer rooted in the style and structure of traditional contrapuntal music nor in the formal models of dance music. It arose instead from new beginnings in musical thought that enabled the creation of large-scale, logically structured, *free*, that is, non-contrapuntal, musical forms.

Viewed from this perspective the Vivaldi concerto movement is not one compositional model among many, but a process and an achieve-

ment of historical proportions: the concerto allegro based on the ritornello principle and the structurally justified interchange of tutti and solo is the first normative manifestation of a large orchestral movement. It would be a gross oversimplification to attribute the evolution and the shaping of this type of movement to a single artist, yet this situation is clearly different from the long and complex process leading to the emergence of the sonata form (which never reached the degree of codification of the ritornello form). A number of possibilities came together in the solo concerto movement, with such musicians as Giuseppe Torelli and Tommaso Albinoni playing a decisive role during the pre- and early history of the form. Yet the main figure associated with the emergence of both the concerto allegro, as model movement, and the consistent use of three movements, is, and rightly so, Vivaldi. It was his concertos that became the epitome of the modern Italian concerto, establishing a new language of instrumental music for musical Europe around 1710.

The reasons why the Vivaldi concerto movement was the basis of instrumental music from those decades and why the concerto became the leading instrumental genre before the rise of the symphony are not primarily formal ones. The new conditions in movement and work structure are part of and express changes that affect the fundamental posture of music, and they are reflected in a tangibly different stylistic situation. We therefore correctly regard c. 1710 as a turning point in music history, the point at which the new sound in eighteenth-century music becomes palpable – a new musical language that, unlike that of the seventeenth century, we now consider “old” only to a very limited degree. The main representative of this change in vocal music is *opera seria*, dominated by the great da capo aria; in instrumental music, it is the young solo concerto. No other genre of instrumental music from the period so clearly reveals certain shifts in musical culture and brings as many new elements into musical language as the concerto, which therefore assumed a key function for the future development of instrumental (and not only instrumental) music.

One crucial factor in this special role of the solo concerto is that it was especially suitable for effective public performance. It was also appropriate for princely chambers and private and semi-private performance venues, but chiefly it was directed toward the public, and in Venice, the first bastion of the solo concerto, its home was indeed in the

centers of musical performance. Vivaldi and virtuosos such as Pisendel played violin concertos at the opera, and the hundreds of concertos Vivaldi supplied for the concerts at the Ospedale della Pietà using every conceivable instrument are further proof. Vivaldi's concertos were not primarily directed at an exclusive circle of connoisseurs, but at the broad anonymous audience that attended the performances at the *ospedali* and at the opera houses of the commercial and tourist metropolis of Venice. There can be no doubt that these factors played a decisive role in the music the composer wrote.

The fact that it was a Venetian who led the solo concerto to its first heyday, thereby ushering in the first great century of instrumental music, may also derive from the city's particular richness. Venice possessed the openness and vibrancy of a metropolis devoted to the arts and to amusement and simply overflowed with theater and music. Where, if not here, could music lose the pomp and gravity of traditional stylistic ideals to embark on a freer and lighter tone? What atmosphere could be more propitious to music of engaging melody and imaginative virtuosity than Venice?

Such general qualities of the Vivaldi concerto style are of no less historic importance than the new formal characteristics. In addition to its clear-cut harmonic structure based on major-minor tonality, the Vivaldi ritornello movement is uncommonly vivid and convincing because of the new, concise, and effective thematic language, and because it features a type of solo that permits the instrument to develop all its possibilities, from virtuosity to expressive songfulness. Arnold Schering considers Albinoni responsible for "clearly defining the ritornello principle and for lending it the force of, as it were, a quotation".² This is truer still for Vivaldi, whose first-movement concerto themes had by far the greatest influence on the new style of early eighteenth-century instrumental themes. Heinrich Bessler links Vivaldi's themes with the new "active-synthetic listening" developed during the eighteenth century;³ Karl H. Wörner sees Vivaldi as "the inventor of the new theme", by which he is referring particularly to the complex form of the opening ritornello as "one of the composer's most forward-looking inspirations".⁴

The tutti ritornello, which Vivaldi expanded into a broad, self-contained complex of themes, made possible the large-scale solo that allowed the soloist to stand out to a degree hitherto unheard of in en-

semble music. The associations with certain social and intellectual developments during the century of the Enlightenment are undeniable. “An ideal of the early age of Enlightenment was the emancipation of the individual... . The spirit of the times was marked by a new self-awareness of the bourgeoisie, by the full utilization of the forces within the individual: achievement, courage, and daring”, especially in a city like Venice, in which “the confrontation with the exceptional, with the marvelous, with boldness and adventure, this was a constant, a necessity of life... . Here Vivaldi’s exuberant virtuosity had an ideal environment in which to develop and to take hold”.⁵

His most virtuosic works are clearly the violin concertos. The violin is not only, in general, the instrument with the most highly developed possibilities for virtuosity, it is also the instrument of Vivaldi, who was one of the most prominent virtuosos of his time. He was perhaps the first great eighteenth-century Italian violinist to represent the new type of virtuoso who, as Uffenbach put it, “terrifies” his listeners (how utterly unlike, for example, Arcangelo Corelli). I should also reiterate that Vivaldi wrote solo and double concertos for many other instruments, some of which he established as solo instruments by writing concertos for them, while he required of others a new level of technical virtuosity – all of which is linked also to exploring and to consolidating new, expressive possibilities and tonal effects by these instruments.

If we look beyond the solo concerto, Vivaldi deserves special mention for the other concerto type he developed (presumably shortly after the solo type) for mixed strings and winds. The direct and indirect effects of *Concerti con molti Istromenti* on the concerto (especially in Germany) and, in general, on the developing orchestral style, are still underestimated. It is precisely in this genre that there are links that lead directly to the composers of the Mannheim school of the mid-eighteenth century.

To all these aspects we must add recognition for the new and free sound of Vivaldi concertos, which Alfred Einstein depicted using the lovely image of “fresh air of nature” flooding into a “magnificent baroque hall”.⁶ It leaps out at us in the electrifying, infectious allegro movements and in the supple cantabile melodies and intoxicating color of many slow movements. What a vast distance separates the lilting, serenade-like Andante of the Sinfonia to *Arsilda*, composed in 1716,

with its gentle, supple, insinuating melody in the upper voices, from the gravity and pathos of a Corelli Largo. The world of feeling expressed in these sounds is “the gentle grace of the eighteenth century”.⁷

The Vivaldi concerto had been shaped during the decade of 1710 to 1720; this period and the years immediately following represent the crucial phase in the composer's momentous historical influence. This in no way detracts from the achievements of Vivaldi's later works, it also does not ignore or dispute the wide diffusion of his concertos as late as the 1730s. Still, the period during which the Vivaldi concerto made history is the ten-year span from 1710 to 1720 when the innovations of the Vivaldi instrumental style changed the musical language and the musical thinking of an entire generation.

As our discussion of the concertos has shown, Vivaldi did not retain the style of his early concertos in works written during the 1720s and 1730s. They underwent many stylistic changes, which also allows us to date a given work at least approximately as relatively early or relatively late. “The ritornellos are broader and richer in contrasts, with cantabile or chromatic motivic groups and abrupt modal changes. The solos have more distinct thematic material and more differentiated figuration”, and the ritornellos “often have continuous cantabile melodies, also found in portions of the solos”.⁸ To be sure, these and similar elements are largely overshadowed by the essential unvarying elements of the Vivaldi concerto style, the most conspicuous of which is the ritornello form of the outer movements. This model remained the accepted formal basis of his fast concerto movements to the end, and changes in form were negligible. It is apparent, then, that the composer's interest shifted “from overall movement form to the handling of details”.⁹

It is virtually impossible to determine the extent to which certain features from relatively late works indicate Vivaldi's own development or reflect the stylistic influences of composers of a later generation. This applies to an increased tendency toward setting out motifs in series and to a number of remarkable examples of “cantabile melody..., phrases of which occur almost verbatim in works by the young Mozart”.¹⁰ As astonishing as much of this appears for a composer who was born in 1678 (for example, the opening theme of the “Echo” Concerto, RV 552, from 1740, or the opening of the ripieno of the Concerto in A Major, RV 158), this type of melody began to appear everywhere at

the beginning of the second third of the century. At that time, Tartini, Pergolesi, and Sammartini were already active in Italian music. Vivaldi was, however, no longer in the vanguard of stylistic development, and we should not exaggerate the influence of his works after 1730.

Another aspect of Vivaldi's artistic and stylistic development is worth noting. Vivaldi was apparently not an artist who, before attaining full mastery, gradually evolved a personal style over a relatively long period of development. The composer was probably over thirty when his first set of concertos was published, and we know little or nothing about his development during the very early years, yet the most advanced of the concertos in Opp. 3 and 4 (1711, 1714) already have the unmistakable Vivaldi flavor. While he enriched his music and added some new details during the following decades, the basic stylistic orientation remained unchanged. In this sense, unlike many other artists, Vivaldi does not have a late period.

So far my remarks in this chapter have been almost entirely about Vivaldi as a concerto composer, as if his operas and church music had not been rediscovered. This may seem to contradict my intent – to comprehensively discuss Vivaldi's work – in this biography. The composer's achievement in these other genres is definite, yet a modern reexamination of the composer cannot avoid the conclusion that Vivaldi's exceptional position in musical history and his enduring importance are rooted in his work as a composer of concertos. Vivaldi's contemporaries and the eighteenth-century historians clearly saw this as well: all mention of the composer's special merits centers on his concertos. He “not only performed a boundless service with his many published violin concertos”, Gerber wrote in 1792, “he also gave beginning artists good and correctly composed works for the violin to study...; he also set, as it were, the tone that remained the preferred way of writing concertos for thirty years”.¹¹ It was a certain, albeit small, portion of his concertos that kept Vivaldi's popularity alive the longest in Central and Western Europe, where single works were still reprinted after 1750. *The Four Seasons* enjoyed a special reputation during this period as exemplary program music.

Vivaldi's historical importance is significantly less in all other areas. Of course, there are certain gradations from genre to genre, yet his operas and his church music did not exercise an influence on the development of their respective areas in any way comparable to that of his

concertos and other instrumental music. Here, I think of the string concertos without soloists and opera sinfonias, but especially of new, concerto-like chamber works.

This all says very little about the artistic importance of Vivaldi's vocal works. We would do well not to make sweeping judgments if only because such a small portion of these works are available to us today and because very few comparable works by his contemporaries are accessible. Moreover, we still have a difficult time relating to genres such as *opera seria* and the cantata. Our yardstick for these remains limited to the artistic power and effect on listeners of single works, and, granted, some sensational finds have been made in these genres. The sacred music, most of all such works as the mass movements, the Magnificat, the Stabat Mater, and some of the large psalm settings (such as the "Dixit Dominus" and the "Beatus vir", both *in due cori*) are so compelling that they have been spontaneously compared to Bach's Latin church music.

Vivaldi's sacred works have two especially remarkable stylistic aspects. On the one hand, they reveal an entirely new side of the composer in that they continue traditions of the polyphonic church style, while, on the other, they so unmistakably contain the language of his concertos that they still sound like typical Vivaldi. Not only do they contain the main features of the concerto movement model but they also display the many elusive qualities that constitute the essence of the Vivaldi idiom.

Regardless of how we judge the importance and the artistic worth of Vivaldi's music, no one will seriously dispute that its entirely characteristic individual achievement sets it apart from other music of the early eighteenth century. It contains aspects not found elsewhere in this form and combination: great spontaneity, exuberant sensuality, spacious and free virtuosity, and a tonal imagination that extends to impressionistic mood painting. His music also contains within light, transparent movement many elements that offset the danger of one-sided and predictable expression. Vivaldi entitled his second printed set of concertos *La stravaganza* to characterize the unusual, strange, and irregular side of his music. Abrupt contrasts, bizarre melodic and harmonic turns, unruly rhythmic-metric accents, a virtuoso madness that violates the "amiable and cantabile style" are all aspects of this tendency that often irritated his contemporaries.¹² In 1752 Quantz criticized the "frivolity and arro-

gance” Vivaldi had sunk to, “both in composition and in performance”,¹³ and the English music historian John Hawkins described Vivaldi’s concerto style as “wild and irregular”.¹⁴

While today’s listeners no longer notice these peculiarities to any significant degree, the broad renaissance that Vivaldi’s works are currently enjoying is strengthened because, to some extent, these productive tensions and excitement live in his music. Almost no other composer of his generation shares Vivaldi’s broad, free spirit, the pulsating life of an approaching new age; yet it also reveals something of a Venetian culture that clearly bore the mark of a declining civilization and of the personality of an artist who embodied these contradictory forces. His music embraces all the fullness, movement, and color of Venetian life, as well as its penchant for exaggeration, eccentricity, and many things that point to ambivalent, cryptic, and complex feelings. The unique attraction of Vivaldi’s music lies precisely in this combination: an accessible, spontaneous kind of music filled with the sensual warmth of the here and now, with, at the same time, a side in which clear contours contrast with wan twilight and with the nuances of fluid transitions; music that has room for the bizarre and the high-strung, for the excitement of nocturnal visions, for melancholy and desolation, in which the elemental and the genuine are coupled with artistic refinement. The sum of all these qualities makes Vivaldi’s music a distinctive voice in the concert of this great musical century.