

Seattle Baroque Orchestra Program Notes

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Vivaldi in Venice

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Venice was an early trading hub and economic powerhouse. While its political dominance had lessened somewhat by the early 18th century, a tradition of opulence had been well established which was still fertile ground for art and music. The thriving cultural life of Venice was renowned throughout Europe, and the city was a requisite stop on any traveler's "Grand Tour."

Probably the best-known Venetian composer of all time is **Antonio Vivaldi** (1678-1741). The eldest son of a violinist, he was trained for the priesthood and ordained in 1703; hence his nickname, "the Red Priest." (The "red" refers to Vivaldi's hair, evidently as impressive as his hooked nose.) He seems to have found music more compelling, however, than the Church; according to legend, he was known to interrupt the Mass in order to jot down ideas for musical themes. The same year he was ordained, Vivaldi began teaching in one of the state-sponsored *oespedali* of Venice, the *Pietà*. This was an all-female establishment, which was part orphanage, part conservatory, and part professional orchestra of the highest caliber—one French critic, Charles De Brosses, found it superior to the Paris Opera. Indeed, glowing contemporary reports abound of the virtuosity, on every conceivable instrument, of these girls and women (for many remained into adulthood). Vivaldi served as a resident composer for the *Pietà*, and one of its few male staff members; it can be assumed that most of his works had their first performances here. He produced hundreds of concertos as well as sonatas, cantatas, and operas.

The *Concerto in A* heard here, rather than featuring a solo instrument or instruments, is a virtuoso ensemble piece. The string writing is intricate and exuberant, calling for both abandon and finesse from the orchestra. In the following D major work, the title "concerto" is used more as we have come to expect, indicating a piece in which solo voices, in this case four violins, are contrasted with a *ripieno*, or "back-up" group. The fanfare-like opening is typical of trumpet writing: earlier Venetian and Bolognese concertos frequently included the trumpet and the imprint of that instrument was lasting. The four soloists frequently pair off, creating a duet of duets; at other points the first violin is left alone to spin out lyrical solo lines.

One hundred years before Vivaldi, Italian composers were creating a new vocal style which broke with lofty Renaissance ideals in favor of human emotionalism. Before the concept of instrumental virtuosity existed, composers were imitating this declamatory vocal style in writing for instruments; with this imitation of singers came the first flowering of the violin's expressive capabilities.

Salamone Rossi (1570-1630) was among the first composers to publish violin sonatas. He was a Jewish composer working in Mantua; it attests to his status at the Gonzaga court that the requirement for Jews to wear a yellow badge was waived for him. Rossi published many books of vocal madrigals as well as instrumental music, which is notable for the move away from homogeneous, canzona-like texture towards the separation of prominent treble lines from the bass.

Biagio Marini (1587-1663) was a violinist at the cathedral of St. Mark's in Venice, where as a young man he played under **Claudio Monteverdi** (1567-1643). One of the most extraordinarily mobile musicians of his generation, Marini is known to have worked in at least ten cities, from Ferrara to Dusseldorf, before returning to Venice in the 1650s. He was among the first composers to exploit techniques which are specifically violinistic, such as double-stops, slurs, tremolo effects, and even scordatura (mis-tuning). The haunting *Passacaglia* on this program is uncharacteristically sober for Marini, whose style generally exudes a playful quirkiness.

The three Monteverdi pieces we have included were written as vocal madrigals. Our performance of them on violins and violas represents the venturing by instrumentalists into singers' domain which so profoundly influenced the earliest sonatas. Monteverdi was and is considered a revolutionary for his incorporation of human psychology into the art of music. The study of emotion, and how to manipulate it, was central to his work, which included hundreds of madrigals and some of the earliest operas ever written. From the pathos of the *Lamento della Ninfa* to the swagger of the *Ballo*, these three pieces provide a small window on the breadth of the human passions as Monteverdi saw them.

The next composer represented on our program, **Anna Bon**, remains tantalizingly obscure; the frontspieces of her three volumes of music provide all the information we have about her life. These indicate that she was born in 1740, and thus that all of her known works were published before she was twenty. Listed on the title pages as "Anna Bon di Venezia," she is thought to have been the daughter of a prominent Venetian architect and scene-painter. Apparently Bon had left Venice at a young age for she was employed at the Brandenburg Court of Bayreuth at the time of the sonatas publication. The Margrave of Brandenburg was married to Wilhelmina, the sister of Frederick the Great; like her brother, Wilhelmina herself composed and brought a flourishing musical life to her court. Anna Bon's compositional style, as heard in the keyboard sonata presented here, demonstrates the beginnings of the transition from baroque to classical style.

Giovanni Legrenzi (1626-90) represents another, earlier transition, but one which was almost as far-reaching: that from the early baroque period of Rossi and Monteverdi, which was characterized by experimentation and emotional extremes, to the full-

fledged “High Baroque” manifested by Vivaldi and others. It is perhaps inevitable that the second half of the 17th century saw a slowing of the extraordinary spate of musical creativity which had occurred in the first. Legrenzi’s generation began to expand and formalize the instrumental sonata as it had been bequeathed to them by its first proponents, paving the way for the achievements of Corelli (whose innovations would influence virtually all the string writing that followed). Legrenzi was the son of a violinist, and like Vivaldi an ordained priest. His sonata for four violins shows us the expansion of the short, contrasting sections typical of earlier sonatas into what could be considered discrete movements.

The 1705 *Folia* of Vivaldi is a set of variations on this popular tune, which had been well-known in Italy for generations. Corelli published a violin sonata based on *Folia* (which can be translated as “madness”) a few years earlier; Vivaldi’s version expands on this by adding a second violin and even more extravagant pyrotechnics for both violins and cello.

Vivaldi’s B minor *Concerto for Four Violins* closes our program. This piece was apparently of great interest to Johann Sebastian Bach, for he transcribed it as a keyboard work. As in the *D major concerto*, Vivaldi begins with a trumpet-call opening, but this time it is imbued with fiery suggestion. The first movement engages the four soloists in animated conversation; in the following impressionistic *Larghetto*, melody is replaced by sheer texture as each instrument weaves its thread into a harmonic progression. The rousing final *Allegro* is Vivaldi at his best, asking us only to enjoy the ride.