

PROGRAM NOTES

On March 4, 1678, an earthquake struck Venice. That same day saw the birth of Antonio Lucio Vivaldi, who, it seems, began as he was meant to continue. Vivaldi sent shockwaves through musical life across Europe over the course of his life; his formal innovations exerted a profound influence on his fellow composers, and his technical virtuosity on the violin set new standards for subsequent generations to live up to. His compositional novelties and charismatic performances did not, however, always endear him to his fellow composers. His most authoritative biographer, Michael Talbot, pithily summarized his social standing with the observations that he “tended to stay aloof from his fellow musicians (especially the most talented of them),” and that of all his noble patrons, none was a fellow Venetian. This afternoon’s program includes the music of several of Vivaldi’s most prominent Venetian contemporaries. Some of them eagerly embraced Vivaldi as a model, and others rejected him, but none was free from his influence.

Antonio Lotti, a bit more than ten years older than Vivaldi, was the best-regarded Venetian composer of the generation until Vivaldi’s star rose in the 1710s, and even thereafter was perhaps more universally respected, if less widely known. He spent the majority of his career at San Marco in Venice, rising at the end of his life to the position of *maestro di capella*. Distinguished as a superb contrapuntal craftsman and accomplished teacher, his secular works did not always rise to the level of his liturgical music; several writers have noted the underdeveloped orchestral writing in his operas. Vivaldi borrowed from Lotti more often than from anyone else, surely signaling respect, but he often transformed Lotti’s original music with more imaginative orchestral textures. This practice, in tandem with the poor state of preservation of many of Vivaldi’s works, led several pieces of Vivaldi’s to be erroneously attributed to Lotti until recent years. Lotti’s opera *Ascanio* was given at Dresden in 1718, with the participation of several other Venetian musicians. It has only recently become available in a modern edition; this evening’s performance of the *Sinfonia* is a rare opportunity to hear an excerpt from it.

In 1720, Benedetto Marcello, a nobleman and composer, published a satirical pamphlet titled *Il teatro alla moda* (The Fashionable Theater), in which he skewered—with great wit but little brevity—the excesses and absurdities of *opera seria*, the highly stylized type of “serious opera” that was then the standard. Vivaldi, by then a leading opera composer, was a principal target of Marcello’s attacks. The pamphlet ridicules such typical Vivaldian techniques as the *bassetto* aria in which violins and viola provide a bass line for the singer with the cello and harpsichord remaining silent; extended and virtuosic introductions to arias by the violin, and variations on the melody *La Follia*. The pamphlet generally impugns the knowledge and intelligence of opera composers along the broadest of lines. Going still further, Marcello paints a damning picture of the financial and moral conduct of the impresarios running opera productions. This section appears to have been intended to cause Vivaldi actual harm, and was in fact based on Marcello’s personal experience with Vivaldi. As a magistrate, Marcello had on several occasions sat in judgment of lawsuits brought against Vivaldi in connection with his opera productions. Whatever the reason for his antipathy, Marcello did indeed hamper Vivaldi’s success for a time, causing the cancellation of at least one major engagement.

One might assume, then, that Alessandro Marcello, brother of Benedetto, would belong in the “enemy” column among tonight’s composers. This is not the case. Alessandro and Benedetto Marcello were at loggerheads, and even in court, by 1718. Only two years after his brother’s assault on Vivaldi’s good name, Alessandro provided Vivaldi with a warm letter of introduction to Maria Livia Spinola Borghese in Rome. This connection led to the commission of one of Vivaldi’s most successful operas, *Ercole sul Termodonte*. Alessandro Marcello’s music, too, is less hostile to the Vivaldian model than that of his highly conservative brother. Tonight’s concerto, from his 1738 collection, *La Cetra*, has some Vivaldian turns of phrase, and *bariolage* passages (continuous string crossings) for solo violin, a favorite device of Vivaldi’s; it also, however, demonstrates a strong affinity for Germanic contrapuntal writing, albeit within a proscribed tonal palette.

The most important engine of Vivaldi's reputation outside Italy was his 1711 collection of concertos, *L'estro armonico* (The Harmonic Inspiration). Published in Amsterdam by Estienne Roger as Vivaldi's opus 3, it was extraordinarily popular, and initiated a two-decade vogue across Europe for concertos in the Vivaldian mode. Evaristo Felice dall'Abaco, born in Verona in 1675, spent his career at the court of the Elector of Bavaria, in Munich, and in exile in Belgium. His music showed a marked interest in the French style; his debt to Vivaldi was rather smaller than those of many of his contemporaries. His opus 2, *Concerti a quattro da Chiesa*, from which tonight's concerto is drawn, was published in 1712; while the vogue for concerti of the year immediately following Vivaldi's opus 3 may have helped with its sales, the apparent model is Albinoni, and in fact it cannot be said to display any particular awareness of Vivaldi's work.

Had there never been a Vivaldi, Tomaso Albinoni might well be remembered as the supreme Italian master of the concerto genre in the early eighteenth century. A major force in the international popularization of the concerto, he left behind a voluminous legacy of finely-wrought and beautiful concerti for various instruments. Early in his career, Vivaldi was significantly influenced by Albinoni; later on, in the 1710s, the influence went the other way. According to Talbot the two men had little personal contact despite their proximity in age, aesthetics, and geography, but this is perhaps consistent with Vivaldi's known tendency to steer clear of colleagues who might prove his equal. The *Concerto op. 9, no. 3* features two solo oboes.

Francesco Maria Veracini may with some justice be called an "enemy" of Vivaldi's, but this is hardly exceptional; Veracini was a difficult and volatile personality, known for engaging in bitter rivalries wherever he went. He was described by Charles Burney as possessing a *capo pazzo*: "crazy head." Born in Florence, Veracini worked in Venice contemporaneously with Vivaldi in the 1710s, but in 1717 obtained a coveted post in Dresden. His relations with his colleagues there turned sour quickly; his salary was larger than those of Johann David Heinichen and Johann Georg Pisendel (both former students of Vivaldi's, and the latter his close friend), who were nominally his superiors, causing both men to receive Veracini with some hostility. While this feud was quite real, it seems to have driven Veracini to paranoid imaginings, and he came to believe that there was a conspiracy to murder him. Evidently to escape this ephemeral threat, he jumped from a third-story window and fled Dresden, carrying with him a limp to show for his misadventures for the rest of his life. While no such dramatic anecdotes are attached to his known activities in Venice, the *Overture* on today's program can be understood as a relic of a competitive relationship with Vivaldi. The six *Overtures*, which in today's parlance would be called suites, are collections of dances preceded by an overture in two sections. They were performed in Venice in 1716 for the visiting Elector of Saxony. Both Vivaldi and Veracini sought employment in the Saxon court at Dresden. It was Veracini who was offered it. The *Overtures* are typical of Veracini in both their strengths—richly detailed and imaginative inner voices and counterpoint, rhythmic vitality, and an almost Handelian lyricism—and their weakness: a tendency towards unvaried repetition bordering on the obsessive.

Baldassare Galuppi, now largely forgotten, was the leading Italian composer of the generation after Vivaldi. A student of Lotti, he shares with his teacher the curious distinction of having had works of Vivaldi's erroneously attributed to him. The concerto in today's program features, somewhat unusually, two flutes taking solo roles.

The old saw from Dallapiccola, made famous by Thomas Beecham, that "Vivaldi wrote the same concerto 500 times," is well disproved by an example like the final piece on today's program, the *Concerto in C major RV 557, per molti stromenti* (for many instruments). The large concertino group includes two violins and two oboes, a combination more frequently associated with Dresden composers like Heinichen and Zelenka. Vivaldi takes full advantage of the scoring to create both grand and intimate textures, including a highly ornate duet in thirds for the two solo violins in the second movement. This concerto was not published in Vivaldi's lifetime, and survives in manuscript at the Biblioteca Nazionale Universitaria Torino.

—Jude Ziliak