

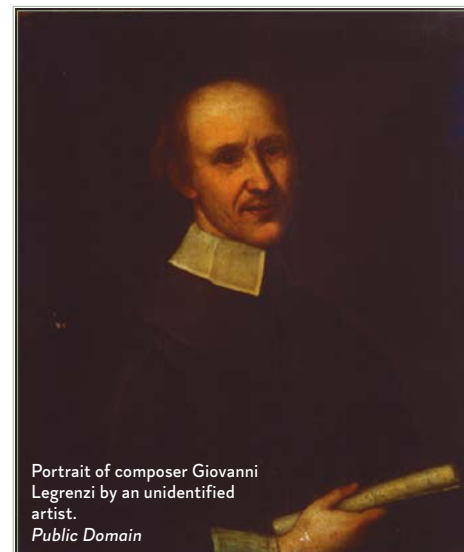


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LIFE OF ANTONIO VIVALDI

Antonio Vivaldi was an Italian composer, violinist, teacher, and impresario of the Baroque period, perhaps best known today for his instrumental compositions, particularly those for strings. As a composer, he is credited with popularizing and establishing numerous innovations in form, style, and orchestration. He was known for working hard and speedily, and he wore many hats, professionally speaking. Vivaldi's influence on European music was far-reaching during his lifetime, and the popularity of his compositions was undeniable. However, his work gradually faded into obscurity after his death and was not revived to any great degree until the 1920s, nearly 200 years later.

Antonio was born on March 4, 1678 in Venice, the Italian "floating city" famous for its canals. Legend would have it that an earthquake shook the city on the day of his birth, but this rumor has since been discredited by historians¹ From birth, it was clear that Antonio's health was not quite what it ought to be, and he struggled with chronic respiratory difficulties throughout his life, which are now thought to have been some form of asthma. Among his five known siblings, Antonio became the only professional musician. His father, Giovanni Battista Vivaldi, had been a barber by trade before becoming a violinist and was likely Antonio's first music teacher.² He certainly taught him to play the violin, and they performed together throughout Venice while Antonio was still quite young. His father worked as a musician in the Basilica di San Marco under the *maestro di cappella* Giovanni Legrenzi, who may have given Antonio lessons in organ, theory, and possibly composition.³ Due to sparse and sometimes inconsistent records, little is known for certain about Antonio's earliest musical education. Whatever his training, he clearly had a solid foundation in the musical arts when he



Portrait of composer Giovanni Legrenzi by an unidentified artist.
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¹ Micky White, *Antonio Vivaldi: A Life in Documents*, Florence: Olschki, 2013, 11.

² Michael Talbot, *Vivaldi*, London: J.M. Dent, 1978, 36-39.

³ Karl Heller, *Antonio Vivaldi: The Red Priest of Venice*, Trans. David Marinelli, Portland: Amadeus Press, 1997, 40.



accepted a professional post at the Ospedale della Pietà, a convent and orphanage that housed a well-respected music conservatory. However, before he found his way to this job – which would figure in his professional life for most of the next 40 years – Antonio Vivaldi was looking in another direction altogether.

At age 15, Vivaldi began studying to be a priest and was ordained ten years later, in 1703. He is

famously remembered by the nickname “The Red Priest,” which he apparently acquired due to his vividly red hair. However, he did not remain a priest for very long after his ordination. Varying accounts attribute this to such wide-ranging causes as his poor health and a deeper desire to pursue music.⁴ In the same year that he left the priesthood, Antonio turned his professional attention to music full-time. At the age of 24, he was hired

FUN! FACT!

Vivaldi most likely left his work as a priest because of his health, as his respiratory condition would have made it difficult to say lengthy Masses, which would have also required him to sing and chant in Latin extensively. But one rumor that surfaced during this period of Vivaldi’s life was that he once got so distracted by a fugue theme he thought up during Mass that he stopped the celebration, went to his office to write out his idea, and then returned to finish the church service!

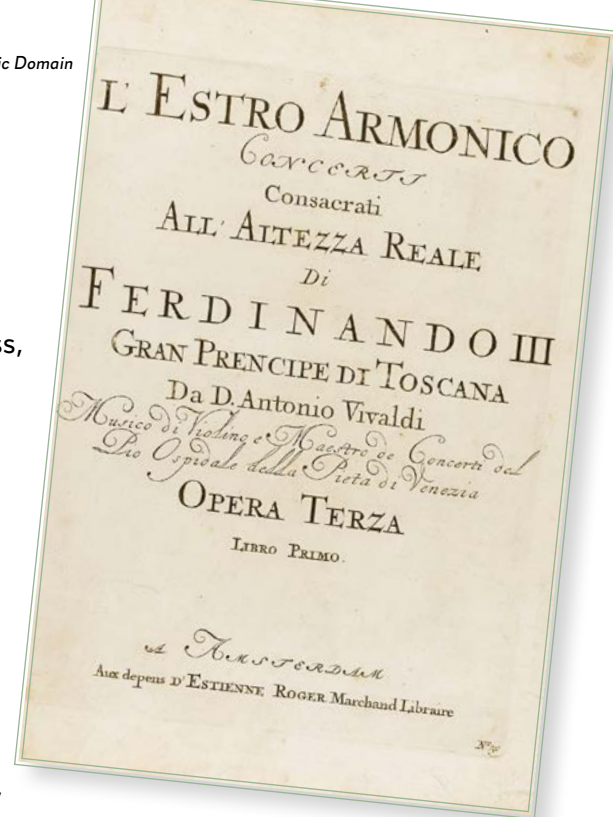


as a musician at the Ospedale della Pietà. Over time, he served as a teacher, orchestra director, violinist, composer, choir director, and purchaser of instruments for the Pietà – often serving in multiple posts at once, as would have been common in similar situations at the time. His responsibilities would have included teaching music theory, the playing of specific instruments, or both; composing vocal and instrumental music for all sorts of ensembles and occasions, including sacred and secular festivities; rehearsing and conducting the choir and orchestra; and much more. The Pietà and similar institutions in Venice were well-funded by their patrons. As a result, working at the Pietà gave Vivaldi access not only to a respectable budget, but also ample opportunities to experiment creatively and hone his skills as a composer. Since his contract required him to keep his students constantly supplied with new music to learn – both for their own improvement and for public performances, which were given on nearly every feast day and holiday – Vivaldi's compositional output for the Pietà was considerable. He wrote dozens of concertos, symphonies, and oratorios – one major work for every feast day and many more works, besides.⁵

Eighteenth-century Venice was obsessed with music. The city's artistic history and reputation was rich and well-established and had been since at least the Renaissance. Antonio Vivaldi, whose family was neither wealthy nor of a high-ranking social class, was born into a period of particular intensity in the musical life of the city. Music and music-making touched every level of society. From people singing in the streets as they went

about their daily business, to the many and famous improvised songs of the gondoliers steering the canal boats, to the aristocrats who not only owned theaters and sponsored musicians financially but also were often amateur musicians themselves at a time when other European aristocrats scorned instrumentalists as lower-class – in these ways and many more, music accompanied daily Venetian life. Venice had been the first city in Europe to open an opera house with a paying public in 1637. Five or six major theaters were fully active in the city throughout a given year's three opera seasons – perhaps not unlike the U.S. sports seasons we are used to in modern times – and the city had an international reputation as a powerhouse in the realm of opera.⁶ Such was the Venice that Vivaldi grew up in, absorbing music of all styles, genres, and social classes; and such was the Venice in which he reached his maturity as a composer.

In addition to his many and various duties at the Pietà, Vivaldi began to have his compositions published in 1705, which saw the publication of his first collection of sonatas. By 1712, his Opus 3 – a set of violin concertos called *L'estro armonico* – had established his reputation throughout Europe. Within a year, the Pietà had



⁵Ibid, 24-27.

⁶Ibid, 30-33.



Portrait of Prince Philip of Hesse-Darmstadt, governor of Mantua, by an unidentified painter circa 1730. Public Domain

given Vivaldi leave to travel and put his musical talents to use outside the city of Venice. 1713-1718 saw him writing operas and other works for major theaters in other Italian cities like Vicenza and Florence, and at one point he turned out six operas in two years.⁷ As Vivaldi ventured further out into the world, his popularity spread. His published concertos were becoming known in major cities and even reaching some tiny towns. His style also became known to visiting musicians and music students from across Europe, who absorbed his techniques and took them back to their homelands. Additionally, Vivaldi was often actively involved as conductor and virtuoso violinist in performances of his own works, which would not have been unusual for composers of his time.⁸ Evidence from some of his surviving letters indicates a practical man who understood the scope and specifics of mounting a concert or opera production – and who, at this point in his career, probably concerned himself with the smallest details because he had to. One letter discussing just one opera season at Ferrara (likely about one-third of the year) indicates that

VIVALDI'S NEED FOR SPEED

Vivaldi composed quickly, even inventing a musical shorthand that he used to speed things along. This makes sense when he was constantly expected to provide music for the Pietà's chorus and orchestra, as well as writing operas and other works for outside engagements. If he had especially little time, he sometimes reused or reimagined passages from his own – or other composers' – existing works. This was normal at the time; even Bach did this occasionally. Even Vivaldi's most famous work, *The Four Seasons*, contains music from his own oratorio *Juditha*, including the melody from Judith's aria "Vivat in pace."

⁷Ibid, 37-39.

⁸Ibid, 40-41.



Vivaldi not only provided his music to the theater, but also recruited the singers, instrumentalists, and dancers; adjusted the length of the show to suit its likely audiences; had copies made of all the scores; was involved in the logistics of selling tickets; and may have also been involved in stage direction and choreography.⁹ As quickly and fervently as he composed music, Vivaldi apparently approached all the practical aspects of producing a show with similar energy.

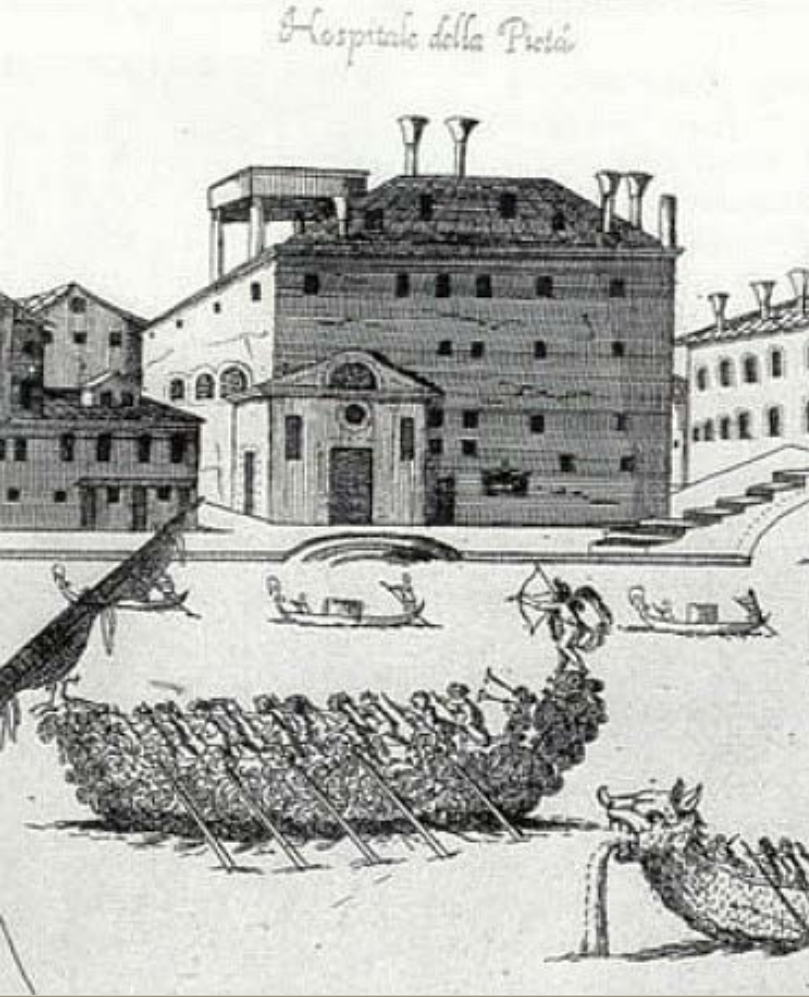
From 1718-1722, Vivaldi vanishes from the records of the Pietà. (This happened a few more times before he finally left his post for good in 1740.) Around this time, he accepted the prestigious position of *maestro di cappella* in the court of Prince Philip of Hesse-Darmstadt, governor of Mantua. He moved there for three

years and produced several operas, after which he brought his distinctive operatic style to Rome – a fierce musical competitor of Venice – in 1722.¹⁰ Upon returning to Venice a few years later and resuming his post at the Pietà, the terms of his contract were amended, limiting his teaching responsibilities so he could prioritize traveling, composing, and performing. By now, he was famous across Europe, and the Pietà – while wanting to use his talents as often as possible – did not want to tie him down too strictly and thus risk losing him altogether. Indeed, after 1725, the bulk of Vivaldi's professional work lay in freelancing, and he traveled more frequently, farther away, and for longer periods of time, occasionally returning to Venice to stage a new opera or attend to his duties at the Pietà.¹¹ This later period of his composition, which lasted until

⁹Ibid, 58.

¹⁰Talbot, 64.

¹¹Pincherle, 46.



A rendering of the Ospedale della Pietà prior to its church facade being built in the 19th century. Public Domain

remain lost, we know that Vivaldi is responsible for producing a staggering amount of music. He wrote over 500 concertos (around 230 of which are for violin), numerous sacred works like cantatas and oratorios, anywhere between 46 and 94 operas, and about 90 sonatas and other forms of chamber music. He solidified the concerto as a standard and popular instrumental form. His stylistic influence is deep and direct in some of the most famous works of Johann Sebastian Bach, a titan of Baroque music. *The Four Seasons*, a group of four violin concertos based on sonnets about the seasons of the year, remain Vivaldi's best-known and most popular composition today. Several more lost Vivaldi works have been rediscovered and performed in the twenty-first century, most recently in 2015¹³ – so who knows what Vivaldi may yet have in store for us?

his death in 1741, included several commissions by European nobility and royalty, including cantatas, concertos, and operas.

In the last few years of his life, Vivaldi found the popularity of his music ebbing in the face of the mercurial artistic tastes of Venice, which hungered for the newest musical trend. After selling off some of his manuscripts for additional money, he moved to Vienna, evidently hoping to continue composing there with the support of Emperor Charles VI.¹² Unfortunately, the emperor died shortly thereafter, and Vivaldi lost the prospect of a royal and reliable source of income. By the time of his own death in July 1741 at the age of 63, the composer had become seriously impoverished.

After his death, Vivaldi's music gradually faded into obscurity before undergoing an enthusiastic revival in the early 20th century. Although some of his works

FINAL QUESTIONS!

It was common for composers in Vivaldi's time to work many jobs (conductor, teacher, performer, etc.) in addition to composing.

Why do you think this was?

Do you think this is still true of musicians today?

Why or why not?

How might you or someone you know relate?

¹² Walter Kolneder, *Antonio Vivaldi: His Life and Work*, Trans. Bill Hopkins, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1970, 180.

¹³ Scaramuccia, "New Discoveries of Vivaldi (2016)," <https://scaramucciaensemble.com/en/new-discoveries-of-vivaldi/> (2024), accessed 6 January 2025.