ON VIVALDI'S *L'ESTRO ARMONICO*

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Conservatemi il vostro buon genio,
e vivete felici.[1]

Suggested recordings:
Chiara Banchini / Ensemble 415 (2015)
Christopher Hogwood / Academy of Ancient Music (1981)

1.

L'estro armonico is a set of concertos by Antonio Vivaldi [1678-1741], his first major work published north of the Alps (in Amsterdam, 1711). This set of concertos greatly influenced the evolution of concerto form as it developed north of Italy. But there is an aspect about the set that is difficult to articulate without mentioning something of Vivaldi's biography. The anecdotes that are told about Vivaldi's life tend to obscure their usefulness for understanding Vivaldi's music, and so we will remain on the outskirts of the topic.

Vivaldi was born and lived most of his life in Venice. The Republic of Venice was known in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for its musical style and aesthetic. Vivaldi appears as one of the last figures in that sequence of Venetian composers, but no less than a very important one. Vivaldi's office for much of his life was as a violin teacher and composer at the Pio Ospedali della Pietà in Venice, a home for orphaned and abandoned girls that not only provided an education but also took special interest in teaching the girls music. Contemporary accounts say that the Pietà had fabulous music, with some renown beyond the Republic of Venice. Vivaldi was required to compose music for the girls to play at ceremonies and religious celebrations, and often he would play along with them if needed. But Vivaldi's employment at the Pietà was not secure, despite the genius of the composer, and required a periodic vote for him to remain on staff. In 1709, prior to the publication of *L'estro armonico*, Vivaldi was out of a job, voted out of the Pietà by only a few votes. This was Vivaldi's first of several departures and subsequent returns to work at the Pietà.

Many (if not all) of the concertos in *L'estro armonico* had been performed at the Pietà; for this reason, many historians view *L'estro armonico* as a catalogue of works Vivaldi had prepared while working there. The concertos reveal Vivaldi's skill as a performer and composer as well as the kind of composition that was being performed at the Pietà in the early eighteenth century. Our current understanding of the concertos is quite separated from any religious observation, as on paper they seem to be entirely

secular. We find no reference to a saint or any indication of a religious observance in the title. The only suggestion in this direction is what appears below Vivaldi's name on the title page of the first edition: *Musico di Violino e Maestro de Concerti del Pio Ospidale della Pieta di Venezia*. And this short description does not indicate anything about the context or purpose the concertos might have had at the Pietà.

Due to this lack of evidence, it is difficult to determine what significance these concertos had for their original audience. And with Vivaldi's title *L'estro armonico* (*The Harmonic Fancy*, though the title insinuates more racy translations), it seems that through wild tempi and virtuosic solo passages, the meaningful core of the concertos is shifted toward the realm of the vulgar or the profane. But if we were to listen to the concertos isolated from any reference, removed from their title and Vivaldi's biography, the idea of vice seems really off the mark in connection with the sound. Not only does the title seem to mask the content of the works, but also our understanding of these concertos is largely secular in virtue of J. S. Bach's transcriptions of them. In fact, many say it is because of Bach's transcriptions that Vivaldi received newfound fame in the twentieth century — in part, it was Bach scholars who unearthed Vivaldi's compositions after centuries of neglect; their endeavor was not necessarily to study Vivaldi, but really to discover something new about Bach. It is impressive that J. S. Bach transcribed (and changed little things here and there to make the new instrumentation more palatable) no less than six of the concertos from *L'estro armonico*: solo violins and cello with orchestra became works for solo organ or harpsichord. In the extraordinary case of the tenth concerto of *L'estro armonico* (RV 580 / BWV 1065), Bach took the original arrangement of four solo violins and cello with ensemble accompaniment, and transcribed it for four harpsichords with orchestra. Thus to find a perspective from which to view Vivaldi's concertos, without Bach in the frame, is not easy. For better or worse, the task becomes tricky as Bach's notable transcriptions obscure the strength of any original ties Vivaldi's art had to an implicit content or context.

One might consider other works of art that have a similarly enigmatic provenance, like sacred works that find themselves in a secular residence. A case in point is *Saint Francis in the Desert* (1476-78), painted by Giovanni Bellini (also a Venetian), which we find in the Frick Collection. The painting has an unequivocal religious import despite its context at the Frick mansion, where we come upon it in a sitting room. And it is curious that we find this painting in the Frick Collection; the religious theme places it in a minority compared to the larger holding of landscapes and portraiture. *Saint Francis in the Desert* begs the question as to what held sway over the collector to purchase it: for historical reasons, as a magnificent example of Renaissance art? Or, was it only for aesthetic reasons? (There are many notable aesthetic qualities about the work; to name a few, there is a genius division of light across the canvas [as though portraying different hours of the day in the same vision] and there is a playful depiction of animals including a donkey, a flock of sheep, and a small rabbit.) We do not need to reach for explicitly religious ideas to find resonance between different critical evaluations of the painting. Common ground may be, for example, a deeply felt sense of awe that is present in our appreciation of it. Awe has a funny way of smoldering in our apprehension of certain works of art, like *Saint Francis in the Desert* and *L'estro armonico*. These are works that are overwhelming, and are coy about revealing any simple explanation about their content.

2.

The earliest form of concerto originated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in Venice, with Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli and Claudio Monteverdi. These were compositions in the *stile concertato*, which were composed specifically for Saint Mark's Basilica. The cathedral, by virtue of its architecture, inspired these composers to create a new kind of sound that played on the position of the groups throughout the cathedral (for example, in different choir lofts). Each group of musicians (not only instrumentalists, but also singers) were put in opposition to each other, as though in competition, to create a new texture. These works relied on *antiphony* (essentially the back and forth between groups) that corresponded to the movement of musical parts from one side of the cathedral to the other.

Of the twelve concertos that make up *L'estro armonico*, we will consider the tenth because it recalls the sense of spatial experimentation we find in examples of *stile concertato* (like Giovanni Gabrieli's *In Ecclesiis*). The Concerto no. 10 in B minor for four violin soloists and obligatory cello (Op. 3, no. 10, RV 580) has a large setting of solo instruments that contrast with each other. The *continuo* is used, which is to say the cello and harpsichord to accompany the solo sections in order for the soloists to have more freedom in their parts.

The Concerto no. 10 in B Minor has movements that are in a fast-slow-fast structure, not very distant from how concerto form later became more standardized to follow this sequence in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first movement, *Allegro,* expresses a sense of restlessness, as each soloist is eager to speak. The solo themes are passed rapidly throughout the soloists and the orchestra ensemble. The structure is relatively simple, but the switch from one musician to the next creates a platform for different interpretations of the same idea, like mildly contrasting opinions that are all on the same side of an argument. The continuo instruments (cello and harpsichord) further support the varied texture and tone of the soloists. The continuo here works like the shadow of a flowering hydrangea: it may not capture the color and folds of each blossom, but it determines a form that complements and stabilizes the detail of natural growth. It is incredible to reflect on the overall mood of the concerto, because it is uplifting despite being in the minor mode. The movement continues with melodic themes dashing about, and our sensory appreciation is almost, if not completely, saturated by such undeniably agreeable music that it borders on aesthetic excess. But at the precipice that separates art from exaggeration, we find in this collection of instruments and themes a glimpse of truth about the human experience: the grace of patience and preparedness that begets fine artistic execution.

This expression reaches its apogee in the second movement, *Largo-Larghetto,* where the concerto is able to tug at the harmonic structure of its own fabric. It is no secret that the Larghetto section of this concerto is one of the bright gems in Vivaldi's compositional crown. The ease with which most ensembles play the arpeggio section is deceiving; when we look at the score, we notice that all instruments are playing the same chord with very little melodic change between them as they slide across a harmonic path to a conclusion. In this section, moreover, each instrument in the *concertante* group (that is, the group of soloists) is playing their respective arpeggio figure differently and employing varied techniques. The first violin of the *concertante* group emerges as a virtuoso here, with an expansive arpeggio figure, and a rhythm that requires each note to be played at least twice as fast as everyone else's.

The first violin is also implied to improvise over the arpeggio because Vivaldi did not spe-

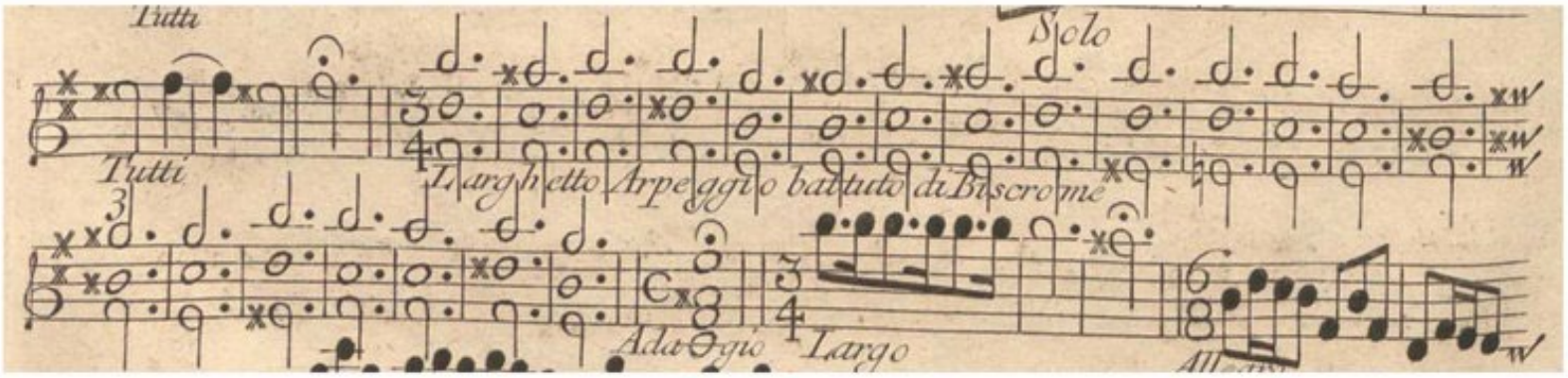

Figure 1. Vivaldi, *L'estro armonico,* Op. 3, No. 10; II. Largo-Larghetto, Violin I concertante. Detail from the first edition published in Amsterdam, 1711. Vivaldi's note — *Arpeggio battuto di Biscrome* — means that the beat should be divided into thirty-second notes.

cify the sequence of notes or ornaments for the part. Performers approach this section from different perspectives, and this is one reason why performances of this concerto always sound different and sometimes radically so.

For this part, it is relevant to consider Vivaldi's biography if only for a moment. Whether or not this concerto was performed at the Pietà, we imagine that Vivaldi composed it for an audience, and also (crucially) for musicians — at the Pietà, the majority would have been his students. They would have known Vivaldi's technique and style, and the musicians would have become something of an extension of the composer. This is more than a conductor who puts forward an interpretation of a seminal work and alters a performer's technique or approach in rehearsal with verbal cues. We find in this Larghetto that Vivaldi is calling for a very specific kind of sound and aesthetic; the ornaments are not written but implied, and students, knowing their teacher, would have executed as taught. Vivaldi would have known their pedagogical pedigree, their imperfections, and their strengths, to illustrate an idea or mood. Although it may look parochial on the surface, we cannot deny the extraordinary art and pedagogy involved in this brilliant approach to arpeggios.

The Larghetto section is truly bewildering because of the subtlety that brings forth its unique sound, and because it resembles music of our own era; the modern quality of these arpeggios gliding across the surface of harmonic consonance is reminiscent of music for films, as music that produces a sensation akin to the unraveling of an event or the passage of time. But when we listen to Vivaldi's movement carefully, we come to note what is archaic beneath the gloss — that is, the beauty typical of the Baroque era that gazes eagerly into the future while it canalizes the energy of the Renaissance toward a new sound. The sublimity is brief, and the harmonic progression is completed before we are ready for it. At this point, the third movement of the concerto takes up a renewed vision of restlessness and extravagance. The slow movement interruption is necessary; as impressive as it was, it becomes difficult to remember the sound that was so striking in the Larghetto. The bonds of form impress a specific doctrine that forces us to recall we are not contemplating one irregularly shaped pearl on a writing desk, but a string of many.

Here we may want to say that musical form specifies content, and that form hinders artistic inspiration. In the case of this concerto, form appears dictated by the content's appeal and the breath of a historical style. In a certain light, Vivaldi's solo themes look stunted in their melodic development, although it is for a specific purpo-

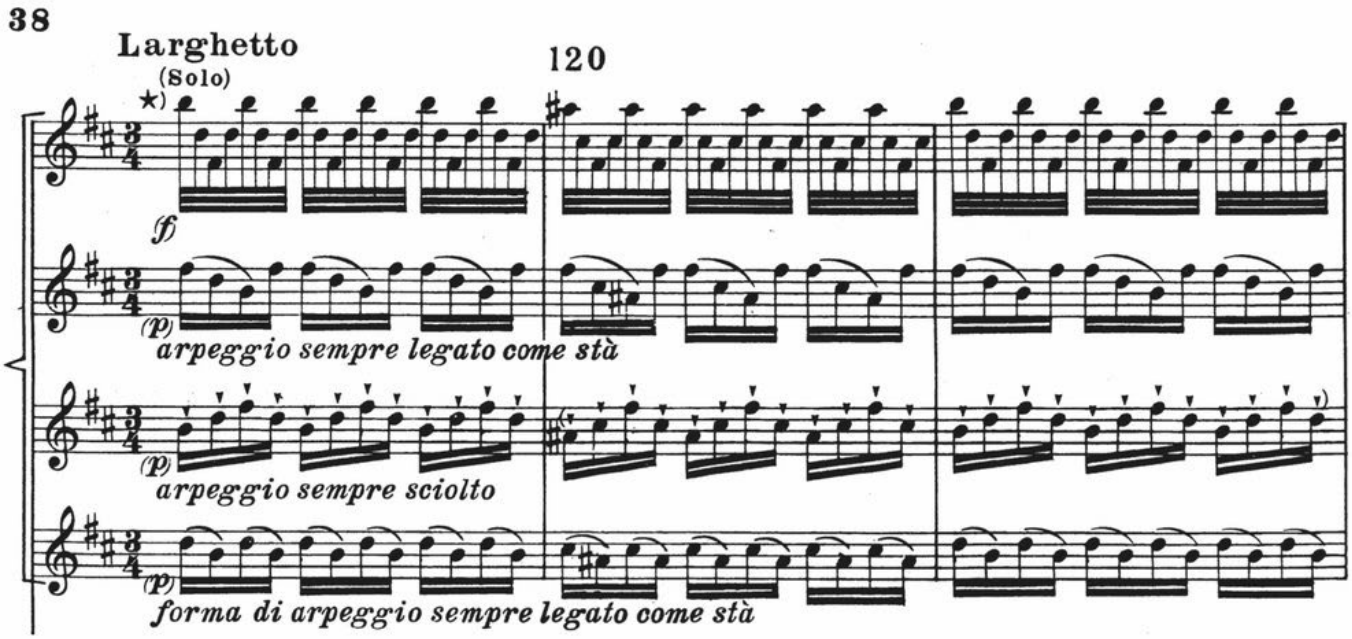

Figure 2. Vivaldi, *L'estro armonico,* Op. 3, No. 10; II. Largo-Larghetto, *concertanti* (violin soloists), mm. 119-121.

se — assistance arrives at great speed to remedy them, but only with an echo of their own shape from a different mouthpiece or with the dry response of another theme. The themes' brevity does not take away from what is charming about them. Even though it feels like there is something left incomplete, the brevity manifests the possibility of a complex idea. Most likely this is because the aesthetic is placed in the domain of affect, harking back to Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli. Vivaldi ties the themes like vessels end to end, and threads them throughout a musical space. The distance between themes is imagined as stones in a slough, used to cross to the other bank, rather than a formal architectural divide. The expanse between bodies in the lagoon, nevertheless, delights in what is concealed by a shadow of superficiality.

NOTA

1 [1] Antonio Vivaldi, "Alli Dilettanti di Musica," *L'estro armonico,* first edition (Amsterdam, 1711).