

CONCERT 28th Sep 2020

This week I will talk about a very special composer Antonio Vivaldi. His music has gained attention and popularity with the more recent amount of scholarship into music and musicians of this period.

This was not always the case and an earlier 20th century Groves Music Dictionary I have gives him a scant entry, most of which quotes criticism from musicologists. Dr. Burney “nothing better than showpieces”, Sir John Hawkins “a pretended paraphrase in musical notes” and the Groves entry itself “Vivaldi in fact mistook the facility of an expert performer for the creative faculty, which he possessed but in a limited degree”. Not all is negative, however. It does go on to suggest “his real distinction lies in his mastery of form and in the application of this mastery to the development of the concerto”. I will elaborate on this later.

In 1716 Johann Georg Pisendel, a violinist living in Dresden, visited Venice and perfected his playing under Vivaldi, who dedicated three concertos to him. He, along with master flautist Quantz (also a musicologist and teacher of Fredrick The Great of Prussia) made Dresden, a city already fond of Italian music, the centre of Vivaldi's music in Germany. Bach transcribed several Vivaldi concertos for organ or harpsichord, though not the concerto, opus III no.10, written originally for four violins and strings, which he transcribed for four harpsichords and strings. He also changed the key from B to A minor.

So who was Vivaldi? His birth date is not recorded anywhere. Conjecture as to his birth year ranges from 1668 to 1678 and it is suggested that 1675 is the most probable year. If he was not born in Venice he was almost certainly born within the territory of the Venetian Republic. He was taught violin by his father, who was an excellent violinist at the Cappella Di San Marco, attached to St. Mark's, and Giovanni Legrenzi the “maestro di Cappella”, who was also at St. Mark's.

During this halcyon period Venice enjoyed a flourishing cultural life. After centuries of invasion, security had been achieved after the realisation that forests of trees growing nearby offered large wooden pylons impervious to rot. The city was shifted onto the marshy tidal flats from the mainland and built on a series of wooden supports. Fleets of ships were also built out of the same unique timber, leading to a booming economy, mostly driven by trade. Preceding Vivaldi were the great Venetian composers Gabrieli, Monteverdi and Cavalli. In Vivaldi's time Venice boasted the likes of Lotti, Caldara, Albinoni, Marcello among others, as well as being home to great painters, writers and sculptors.

Vivaldi entered the Church and was ordained in 1703. This was about the only way a poor young man with talent could receive an education in the arts and enter the world of culture. He suffered chronically from chest complaints (probably asthma) and was constantly accompanied by people to help him. Despite this handicap, his output was enormous, and a letter from the first president of the Dijon Parliament mentions that Vivaldi could compose a concerto in less time than the copyist would take to copy it! Music flourished in the churches (especially St. Mark's) and in the palaces of the nobles. This was particularly so in the four Ospedale which were charitable institutions that took in foundlings, invalids and the daughters of needy families. Several important composers taught at these Ospedali and wrote music for the girls. The Ospedale dei Mendicanti, the Ospedale degli Incurabili and the Ospedaletto were mainly concerned with vocal music. However, The Ospedale della Pietà excelled in instrumental music. Vivaldi was first appointed as the chorus master here in 1703, and

was later appointed professor of violin, musical director and composer. The girls here were mainly illegitimate children who Vivaldi nurtured and raised to a high standard and the “red priest” (a much used nickname Venice gave to Vivaldi because of his red hair) and the Pietà Orchestra rehearsed for many hours a day, allowing a platform for Vivaldi to try out new ideas and have them expertly performed. His connection with the Ospedale della Pietà (including long absences when he was travelling and performing away) lasted until 1740 when, following a failing career as an opera composer, he moved to Vienna where he died a pauper at the end of July 1741. The majority of Vivaldi’s compositions are unpublished and can be found in libraries in Italy and Germany. His opuses include more than 400 concertos for violins, cello, viola d’amore, mandolins, flute, ‘flautino’, oboe, bassoon, trumpet, horns and various ensembles. There also exist 53 sonatas, about 50 sacred works, an oratorio .(Juditha triumphans) numerous cantatas and about 40 operas.

Although Vivaldi was very close to the compositional style of Corelli when he started composing, his benchmark became more like Albinoni, with the style of the concerto grosso, with soloist. Of course the most famous of these is “Le Quattro Stagioni” (The Four Seasons).

The Four Seasons is one of the first examples of so-called program music and has become one of the most popular works in music literature. Each of the four concertos is preceded by a sonnet, which could have been written by Vivaldi but are the work of an unknown poet. Each sonnet bears a letter at the side of each episode, which is repeated at the point in the score representing the same episode. We do not know exactly when it was written, as Vivaldi never dated his manuscripts. They could have been written for different occasions. The first edition appeared in Amsterdam and was published in 1725. The four concertos are generally performed in the order of Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter.

Vivaldi had a profound influence on the development of the concerto. He heralded the three-movement plan of the classical concerto and effectively did away with the role of the slow first movement, mostly starting with a rhythmic ritornello form followed by a melodic, sometimes operatic, slow movement. His finales are often based on dance rhythms, quick and light, similar to the classical symphony.

The recording on YouTube I would encourage you to watch is the one performed by virtuoso English violinist Nigel Kennedy. Nigel is the son of my teacher Prof. John Kenned and comes from a line of great string players. His grandfather Lauri Kennedy was also an outstanding cellist. Born in Randwick, Sydney, Lauri trained at the Royal College in London before travelling to America where he sought his fortune playing in Hollywood with luminaries such as Isaac Stern and William Primrose.

His son John was born in 1923. After graduating (also from the Royal College) John played as principal cellist with great English conductors, including Seargent, Barbirolli and Beecham. In 1959 he settled in Melbourne where he became professor of cello at the Melbourne Conservatorium. History repeats itself and just as John was left by his parents when a baby to be brought up by a wealthy music lover, so John left his pregnant wife Scylla Stoner to embark for Australia. John and Lauri reconciled their differences late r in life and lived close to each other in Hawthorn.

On occasions, instead of a lesson with John, we would get in the car, drive around to Lauri’s house and I would receive a double grilling on the concerto or sonata I was preparing. John and Nigel never met and at the age of seven Nigel was sent away to the Menuhin school in Surrey by his mother. Yehudi became a great mentor for the young Kennedy, nurturing and developing his extraordinary talent. Nigel later banned

his mother from attending his concerts, as she was always harshly critical of all aspects of the performance. Sadly, I believe Nigel and his father never met.

When I first met Nigel in the mid 80s he hadn't adopted the persona of the cockney punk violinist with the "mockney" accent. He walked onto the stage at Hamer Hall for a rehearsal of the Elgar Concerto and I, and two other colleagues, all past students of John's, were staggered at the similarities in demeanour and appearance. When we spoke, we discussed many matters, but the subject of John was forbidden.

I admire Nigel, his punk rock journey opened the door to classical music for millions. A sometimes hitherto obnoxious barrier, real or perceived, that led to the assumption that this music was for the "toffs", was smashed. His 1989 version of The Four Seasons sold over two million copies but attracted scathing criticism from many quarters. However, it not only put Nigel on the map, but also brought Vivaldi to the fore. As a footnote his performance of the Elgar was the best live performance I have ever heard of that wonderful concerto.

The YouTube is entitled "The Vivaldi Four Seasons - Nigel Kennedy" and has an amusing interview at the start.