

## The Vivaldis of Brescia: Extended Abstract

The profiles and activities of the Brescian forebears of Antonio Vivaldi have long eluded scholars. Vivaldi's paternal ancestors were Brescian, at least for several generations. They were not professional musicians. The earliest of the Brescian Vivaldis was Giovanni Paolo (b. 1554). He had several children by each of his two wives. The Vivaldis of the sixteenth century were predominately associated with the church of San Giovanni Evangelista. They lived near many of Brescia's instrument makers, but no direct connection to them has come to light. Floriano Canale, a composer of several books of church music, was the organist of the church at the turn into the seventeenth century. Brescia had a significant past in the cultivation of music of several kinds in the sixteenth century. It is still remembered as an early center for the making of string instruments, but some of its achievements were disrupted by the chaos caused by the plague of 1630-31, which halved Brescia's population. Many makers who survived (or at least their children) moved to Cremona. The Vivaldis may have retreated to the countryside during the plague years. The peak years of information about them come from the late sixteenth century, from the period 1637-1641, from 1664, and (after their move to Venice) from the 1670s and 1680s. It is only in these last decades that their musical activities can be discussed.

Each generation of the family pursued a different profession. Our interest initially focuses on Agostino I (b. 1601), the last child of Gio. Paolo's first marriage. Agostino I was a *tessadro* and a member of the textile trade who maintained a shop near Santa Maria del Carmine. Brescia had a flourishing cloth industry, at least up to 1630. Wool and silk were among its best-known offerings. The father of Agostino I was Gio. (Zuane) Paolo (1554-1613/1626), who identified himself as a *pittore*. Gio. Paolo was, in turn, the son of Antonio Vivaldi Veronese, who was not resident in Brescia.

Several other groups of Vivaldis lived in the Bassa Bresciana in the sixteenth century. Their numbers dwindled in the seventeenth. It is possible that a few were closely related to the Vivaldis living in the city, but because of repetitive use of the same baptismal names, it is difficult to be certain. In the family most closely documented here several spouses came from the (northern) Val Camonica. Well documented lineages bearing the Vivaldi surname are mentioned in the annals of the Crusades and later remembered for their

sailing adventures, their devotional poetry, their banking successes, and their civic services—at scattered locations between Provence and Verona. The most persistent thread of earlier history links the surname with the Knights Templar.

Of the Brescian family, Agostino I died between 1656 and 1662. His oldest surviving son was Agostino II (1641-1693), who attempted to keep his father's business afloat until, in his early twenties, he became a supplier of foodstuffs to Venetian galleys in the Adriatic. He spent roughly two years in Dalmatia (1662-1664) before returning briefly to Brescia to gather the remainder of his family and bring them to Venice to start a new life.

It is from the substantial *stato libero* of Agostino II the see that family configuration in 1664, when Agostino was planning to marry, that we learn that his mother, Margherita, had been making periodic trips to Venice on behalf of her husband's cloth business since the late 1650s. Now, in the autumn of 1664, Agostino brought his mother, sister (Cecilia), young brother (Zan Battista), and another minor, Antonio Casari, who had lived with the Vivaldis since birth, to Venice so that he could marry and set up a home for them all.

Agostino's wedding (12 November 1664) marked a definitive change on several fronts. The bride, Domenica Petternella Buonamigo, from Treviso, had been raised by the family that operated the guesthouse in which the Vivaldis stayed in Venice. Their name was Floighen. They hosted many returning clients, including several sea captains. When in Venice, the Vivaldis always stayed with them. Floighen's wife initiated the idea of "offering her niece Nella" to Agostino as a wife, and so it was that they were married in November 1664. Giovanni Floighen, a *cavaliere*, may have had ulterior motives for this arrangement. He had an entrepreneurial bent, and by the 1670s he had set up a wine business with Agostino II. It came to enjoy significant success. Agostino's brother, Gio. [Zan] Battista, was recruited to carry out some chores for this business, but he focused most of his attention on learning to play the violin. In 1677, a year after he was married, he was serving as an apprentice (possibly through an informal arrangement) at the barbershop of Francesco Botton, near the Rialto. (Quite a few barbers doubled as master musicians. Botton also sold hats, veils, and supplies for other kinds of headwear.) Gio. Battista was soon playing in theater orchestras, and in 1685 he was appointed a violinist at San Marco under the *maestro* Gio. Legrenzi.

After Agostino II and Nella were married, the groom's sister Cecilia lived with them in the parish of San Martino, near the Arsenal. She died prematurely in 1672. Although Agostino's responsibilities in Zara, across the Adriatic, continued until his official discharge in 1689, he must have spent most of his time after 1664 in or near Venice. The wine company that he and Floighen formed with others involved for aging facilities in the foothills of the Alps. Agostino and Nella had four children while living in the SS. Apostoli parish and another four after their move to San Martino in 1672. By the 1680s his wine had developed a particularly favorable reputation in Bavaria. Margherita and Antonio Casari may have moved into Gio. Battista's household, near San Giovanni in Bragora, after the marriage of Gio. Battista (1676). Margherita died in 1677 and was buried in this church, which was near the Ospedale della Pietà.

As the youngest child of Agostino I, Gio. Battista (1655-1736) may never have been involved with his father's shop, but he was periodically enlisted by Agostino II to help with the wine business. He struck off in an independent direction in, or shortly before, 1677, when he was found to be receiving violin instruction. This occurred in what by modern standards seems an unorthodox setting—the barbershop of Francesco Bottion, near the Rialto. We have no clear definition of the nature and duration of Gio. Battista's terms of involvement in Bottion's enterprise, which also sold headwear for men and women. Although Bottion belonged to the barbers' guild and was eligible to take musical apprentices (a pairing that seems unlikely today but was common then), he must have been an amateur. Vivaldi does not seem to have had a traditional five-year apprenticeship, but three fellow apprentices were fined by the instrumentalists' guild in 1681 for failing to register. Guild membership was obligatory if an instrumentalist took paying work in a public venue. It appears that Vivaldi had crossed this threshold sooner than the others.

What kind of music might Vivaldi have learned to play under Bottion's tutelage? The shop was supplied with resources endorsed by the instrumentalists' guild—an armoire of instruments and a chest of music. In the guild context, an applicant would select a piece at random and an instrument of his choice. He might be accompanied by a few others, if available. The probable training repertory at that time would have consisted mainly of trio sonatas. The heavy emphasis on this genre in Antonio Vivaldi's early opuses suggests that that had been the anchor of Gio. Battista's foundation. Gio. Battista did not, as best we know,

try his hand at composition, but he has been identified in recent decades as a prevalent copyist of his son's works.

To judge by the progress of Gio. Battista as a violinist at San Marco (1685) and at the Mendicanti (1689), in both cases under Legrenzi, his ability attracted great interest and warranted high approval. Carlo Francesco Pollarolo, another Brescian immigrant to Venice, may have played a paternal role in lives of Gio. Battista and, in time, his son Antonio (1678-1741), both of whom Pollarolo invited to accompany him to appearances well outside the city.

Gio. Battista's interest was clearly in solo playing, which was part of his remit at San Marco. Yet it comes as a surprise that by 1708 he owned two rare violins. This shows not only that he had the means to acquire them but also that he had the ear to justify their acquisition. It prompts the notion that when his son Antonio began to compose and perform concertos featuring one, two, or four solo violins with a string ripieno, as in *L'estro armonico* (1711), the Vivaldis could have supplied these instruments for premiere performances. This was only the beginning of a new chapter that, much later, became the epilogue of the Brescian family's history and the debut of new kinds of musical repertory.