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Vivaldi's Violins: Tribute to Antonio Vivaldi, Handel & Haydn Society, 27-30 April 2000

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Howard Schott

Vivaldi's violins

Boston's venerable Handel & Haydn Society crowned its 185th season with a four-day tribute to Antonio Vivaldi (27–30 April 2000), combining concerts of his music with lectures about the composer, his seminal influence on the concerto grosso for strings, and Venice in his time. Christopher Hogwood, the H & H's Artistic Director since 1986, led off with a brief and urbane introduction. This was followed by a joint lecture-demonstration offered by Eleanor Selfridge-Field and Stanley Ritchie, 'Virtuoso playing techniques of Vivaldi's time'. Vivaldi's appointment as string teacher at the Pietà in Venice wrought a change in the relationship between instrumental and vocal music. Formerly music for strings had largely followed and been subordinate to traditions of vocal composition. Now, following German prototypes, Vivaldi brought in techniques of bowing to create greater variety of musical textures and heightened levels of energy. Ritchie illustrated these virtuoso innovations, showing how the simplest figures like scales could be elaborated into more complex forms.

'Vivaldi's music now' was the subject of Hogwood's next talk, with musical illustrations and commentary offered by all four of the Baroque violin virtuosos of the event—Stephanie Chase with her 1742 Pietro Guarneri, Stanley Ritchie with his Jacob Stainer of c.1670, Daniel Stepner with his 1740 Sebastian Klotz, and last, but certainly not least, Federico Guglielmi playing on Vivaldi's own violin, an instrument of 1710 labelled Bernardus Colcarius of Genoa. Hogwood made a strong case for the importance of Vivaldi's set of 12 concertos, his op.3, *L'estro armonico*, six pairs of works in major and minor. No fewer than ten of the dozen were transcribed by J. S. Bach, for harpsichord or organ and even as a concerto for four harpsichords and strings. The original 1711 Amsterdam edition of eight part books, carefully prepared, did not always distinguish solo and tutti precisely. Nevertheless, the concertos could properly be performed as chamber music as well as orchestrally and, indeed, would gain in certain respects thereby. To demonstrate this, the three programmes of music by Vivaldi were played during the three days by the four violinists backed by two violas, a cello and a double bass plus theorbo, and harpsichord and/or chamber organ. Hogwood also made a case for performing the famous programmatic *Le quattro stagioni* in his edition

based on the parts in the Manchester Library believed to have belonged to Cardinal Ottoboni, the 18th-century Roman musical patron. This manuscript version differs in some respects from the contemporary print, the basis of all other modern editions, and clarifies some of its ambiguities.

Professor Selfridge-Field returned to the podium to present her richly illustrated lecture on 'The performing arts in 18th-century Venice', replete with details of the various bijou opera houses, with a maximum capacity of 400 and orchestra pits for only eight to ten players, and other venues, such as the *ospedali* like Vivaldi's Pietà. Vivaldi's love of nature, exemplified by such concertos as one depicting a storm at sea and the *Quattro stagioni*, can be compared with the contemporary paintings of Marco Ricci, landscapes dramatized by tempests and cascades. Claire Fontijn's talk on the *Quattro stagioni* continued the theme of nature in musical depiction, offering a detailed analysis of the works with their accompanying *sonnetti dimostrativi*, possibly written by the composer. To ensure that the bird calls, storms, barking dogs and such were perceived by the players, captions and letters cueing the music to the relevant poems were included in the parts for solo violin, violins 1 and 2, viola and the unusually specific basso continuo part. The cello, double bass and archlute are to play in all four, the harpsichord in *Spring* and *Autumn*, the chamber organ in *Summer*, and all of the above in *Winter*. The original edition of the *Seasons*, *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'inventione* (roughly, 'The test piece of harmony and originality') (Amsterdam: Michel Le Cène, 1725), an anthology of the composer's best, also includes three more programmatic concertos among the dozen, one each depicting a storm at sea, a hunt and—anyone's guess—the generically titled *Pleasure* (*Il piacere*).

William L. Monical offered 'The violin and gut strings in Venice', describing the production of strings and the craft of violin making as practised in Vivaldi's time and place. As examples he displayed and discussed a Rugeri seven-string bass viol, a violin by Serafin, and several bows of the period. Thomas Kelly presented a clear and, in the best sense, entertaining explanation of 'Making an Italian concerto: collaboration or competition', stitching together thematic elements belonging respectively to the soloist and *ripieno* instruments, and exploring the principal tonality and its relatives, both near and not so near. The Vivaldi weekend also included a Venetian buffet supper prepared by Donald R. Daly, a food historian and chef, and 'The Golden Age of Venetian glass' by Jutta-Annette Page with

many slides of Murano glass from the Renaissance to the present.

With an all-star cast of players brought together from far and wide, the three concert programmes were skilfully, tastefully and quite brilliantly performed. Phoebe Carrai joined violinists as soloist in several concertos with important obbligato parts for cello. The music included the eight concertos of *L'estro armonico*, the four *Stagioni* and other outstanding examples for solo violin, notably *Il Grosso Mogul* (RV208), *Il Favorito* (RV277) and the exquisite *Anna Maria* (RV349), concertos for two and four violins, a dazzling *Folia* sonata for two violins and continuo (RV63) and, as if to underline the greatness of Vivaldi, Giacomo Facco's florid concerto in A minor, op.1 no.9, a cuckoo in the nest showing how Vivaldi's language was soon debased by his imitators. One came away from the four-day mini-festival with a much higher opinion of Vivaldi as a creative force, a composer of true originality. But what of his vocal music—including his operas, of which so little has yet become widely known? Our appetite has been whetted. Let musicians and impresarios take note!

Beryl Kenyon de Pascual

Investigating early pianos

The pre-Classical piano: expressive claviers and their repertoire in the 18th century, America's Shrine to Music Museum, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, SD, 5–8 May 2000

During the IMS congress of 1987 in Bologna a study session focused on Bartolomeo Cristofori and his followers; as a result of that session, research into the early history of the piano acquired a fresh impetus. In subsequent years new historical findings and technical research were presented at the various Antverpiano and Accademia Bartolomeo Cristofori's Laboratorio meetings, among others. This year, the 300th anniversary of the first reliable documentary reference to an 'arpicembalo di Bartolomeo Cristofori di nuova inventione, che fa il piano, e il forte', the spotlight has once more been trained on the early piano. In addition to special exhibitions organized by museums in Europe and the United States, an international conference to explore the musical and cultural con-

text of the invention and early development of the piano was held in America's Shrine to Music Museum. The number of participants was restricted so as to avoid parallel sessions and to facilitate informal discussions, while specialists at the cutting edge of early piano research were invited from Europe as well as the USA. Although hosted and smoothly run by the University of South Dakota, this was a joint meeting in which the Schubert Club of St Paul, Minnesota, the Smithsonian Institution and the Westfield Center for Early Keyboard Studies also collaborated.

The conference's purpose of investigating the wider context of the piano's first years, its reception abroad and pre-Classical development was carried out from a number of different angles: the contemporary cultural and intellectual climate; other newly invented keyboard instruments which, like the piano, were intended to provide greater expressivity; early pianos in different countries; early piano music; and short demonstrations or longer recitals on a variety of relevant instruments belonging to the Shrine to Music Museum. Since a relatively large number of participants presented papers or demonstrated instruments, I shall summarize the main themes addressed, rather than list contributors and their contributions.

A growing interest in science and mechanical devices among the intelligentsia in the late 17th and 18th centuries, and scientific discoveries such as Newton's second and third laws of motion (which are relevant to the lever and hammer mechanism of Cristofori's piano action), together with the founding of societies such as the Arcadian Academy, would have stimulated the publication of Scipione Maffei's description of Cristofori's 'Nuova invenzione d'un gravecembalo col piano e forte' in the *Giornale de' letterati d'Italia* in 1711. This article, reprinted in 1719 and published in German in 1725, was one factor that publicized the new instrument beyond the frontiers of Italy. Although the tone of Cristofori's pianos was criticized by some contemporaries for being too soft and not strong enough, it corresponded to the more mellow trend of the late Baroque and the lighter colours of the Rococo. Attention was drawn to the introduction during this period of d'amore instruments and other similarly mellow instruments such as the chalumeau, the clarinet and the French horn. It was argued that such developments preceded corresponding changes in compositional technique, and in the discussion following a paper on C. F. D. Schubart and the transition from the late Baroque and Classicism to musical Romanticism it was commented that, significantly, the piano was developed under the Enlightenment but was more generally accepted during