Antonio Vivaldi: Gloria

Although he is one of the baroque era's most famous composers, Antonio Vivaldi's first career was the priesthood. Ordained in 1703 in Venice, his vocation—coupled with his striking red hair—earned him the moniker "il prete rosso," or the "Red Priest." Music ultimately proved the greater draw, and Vivaldi's picturesque nickname was soon the only vestige of his priestly duties.

Around 1704, Vivaldi began working with the Ospedale della Pietà, a Venetian school for orphaned, abandoned, illegitimate, and indigent girls that specialized in musical training. In addition to room, board, and an excellent education in music, the Pietà offered a creative outlet for women at a time when professional opportunities for female musicians were uncertain. The students were well-respected. According to one scholar, "The 'stars' of the Pietà…ranked with the foremost virtuosi of their time in the opinion of connoisseurs." They also played many different instruments; one eighteenth-century writer observed: "[They] play the violin, the recorder, the organ, the oboe, the cello, the bassoon; in fact, there is no instrument large enough to frighten them." New music was constantly needed for the young women of the Pietà, and much of Vivaldi's compositional output was intended for these talented performers.

Although instrumental music was Vivaldi's primary responsibility, in 1713 he took over the composition of choral music for six years after the school's choirmaster, Francesco Gasparini, went on a vacation from which he never returned. (Vivaldi served in the same capacity from 1737 to 1739, when the post was again vacant.) Vivaldi's Gloria in D Major, RV 589—the most famous of his three settings—was probably one of his earliest works written for the school. As was not uncommon in the baroque period, Vivaldi actually based the work on a setting by one of his contemporaries, Giovanni Maria Ruggieri. In Vivaldi's setting, the relatively brief Gloria text (from the Ordinary of the Roman Catholic Mass) is divided into twelve parts—and in true baroque style, each displays contrasts in mood, texture, and vocal color. The second and third sections of the work—the "Laudamus te" and "Gratias agimus tibi"—offer a good example of the dramatic effect of these juxtapositions. The "Laudamus te," a lighthearted duet for two sopranos, expresses the sentiment of adoration, praise, and joy perfectly. In the ensuing "Gratias agimus tibi," full choral homophony shifts the focus to God's great glory, while the fugal conclusion emphasizes its continuity.

George Frideric Handel, Concerto Grosso in B-flat Major, Op. 6, No. 7

While most of George Frideric Handel's fame rested on vocal music, his instrumental compositions received a fair amount of attention during his lifetime. Of all the works for orchestra Handel composed, the Op. 6 collection of "Grand Concertos" is perhaps the best known today. Composed in the span of about a month during the fall of 1739, the set emerged during a relatively unproductive period for the composer. His publisher, John Walsh, was quick to recognize its commercial value and placed an advertisement in the *London Daily Post* directing those who wished to purchase the works either directly to Handel "at his home in Brook's-street" or to Walsh himself. Approximately 100 subscriptions were received, both from members of the aristocracy and from professional musicians and music societies.

When writing the Op. 6 concertos, Handel may well have had Arcangelo Corelli's famous set with the same opus number in mind. In terms of their success, Corelli's concertos were a good role model. Upon their publication in 1714, the older composer's works elicited a rapturous response in England; historian Roger North even went so far as to dub them the "bread of life." Although Handel never directly imitates Corelli, the two collections not only share the same opus number and use the same scoring: a *concertino* (solo group) of two violins and cello, plus four-part *ripieno* (ensemble) strings and continuo. And, like Corelli's, Handel's concertos seem to have been consciously conceived as a collection.

While Handel's Op. 6 concertos bear superficial similarities to those of Corelli, the drama and intensity of focus they exude is purely Handelian. The seventh in the collection, the B-flat Major concerto heard in these concerts is the only one that omits the solo group, celebrating the rich sonority of the entire ensemble. Following a four-movement alternation of slow and fast sections, the work concludes with a brilliantly cheerful Hornpipe based on a movement from a keyboard suite by Georg Muffat, a slightly older composer from whom Handel occasionally borrowed, and who may have returned the favor as well. (Music of the Baroque will perform music by Muffat later this season, in March 2011.)

George Frideric Handel, Dixit Dominus

In 1706, Handel set out for Italy, where he stayed for almost four years. His motivations for traveling there are disputed today, but for Handel's eighteenth-century biographer John Mainwaring, the reason was clear: "The numbers of schools and academies for Music

subsisting in the different quarters of this country, and the vast encouragements afforded to those who excel in the Art, have long conspired, with all the advantages of constitution and climate, to render it the most eminent part of the world for its Composers, Singers, and Performers." In other words, Italy was simply the place to be.

By the beginning of 1707, Handel was working in Rome, where he found himself in great favor with Cardinals Colonna and Pamphili. Their attentions may have led to several attempts at converting the Lutheran composer; as Mainwaring explains, "As [Handel] was familiar with so many of the Sacred Order, and of a persuasion so totally repugnant to theirs, it is natural to imagine that some of them would expostulate on that subject." The patronage of the two cardinals led to employment for the young com poser: in April of 1707—perhaps at the request of Cardinal Colonna—he completed his setting of the Dixit Dominus, his first sacred composition in Italy. Like many of Handel's compositions for the church, the Dixit Dominus may have been written for a special occasion; its large scale, remarkable energy, and technical challenges have prompted some scholars to suggest that it was composed for the Vespers service at Easter.

Scored for solo voices, chorus, and string orchestra, the Dixit Dominus sets Psalm 109 (Protestant Bible 110) as a series of short movements. From the start, the work is intensely dramatic, with contrast between different types of musical textures a primary source of the drama. In addition to the more global contrast between choral and solo movements, Handel changes texture freely within specific sections in order to communicate the meaning of a particular phrase of the psalm. In the opening "Dixit Dominus," for example, Handel moves fluidly from energetic imitative choral statements, to more lyrical solo textures, to tension-filled suspensions, in a way that vividly portrays the substance of the text. He also draws upon individual words and phrases for musical inspiration. In "Virgam virtutis," the vocal line is filled with elaborate ornamentation, as if to illustrate the phrase, "extend your royal power." Finally, music can also add an interpretive layer that is not immediately obvious. In the sumptuous duet for two sopranos, "De torrente," for example, the intertwined solo lines and gently discordant harmonies evoke a feeling of weariness and fatigue only implied in the verse, while the mysterious, steady chanting of "propterea exaltabit caput" ("and restored, he shall stand victorious") reassures the listener that a glorious outcome is imminent.