



Vivaldi at Christmas



With his love of the theatrical and the virtuosic, the prolific, flame-haired priest and composer Antonio Vivaldi was one of the stars of the Baroque, travelling Europe to promote his music and impressing JS Bach, no less, into making arrangements of his music. The son of a violinist at St Mark's Cathedral in Venice, the young Antonio received lessons from his father from an early age, but was sent to join the priesthood at the age of 15. Music remained his abiding passion, though: he's said to have dashed away from the altar to note down a musical idea if it suddenly came to him.

By September 1703, he was in charge of music at Venice's Ospedale della Pietà, one of the city's four orphanages for girls (who were in fact the illegitimate daughters of noblemen and their mistresses, hence the substantial 'anonymous' financial support the institution received). Vivaldi worked there until 1740, fully exploiting the Pietà's renowned orchestra and choir in his demanding music – and providing concertos and choral works for its weekly concerts with astonishing speed.

The music in tonight's concert was not necessarily originally written with Christmas in mind – although Vivaldi did have a habit of recycling pieces he'd previously written for festive occasions. In any case, its drama and theatricality, the graceful beauty of its melodies, and the celebratory energy of its rhythms make it entirely appropriate for the season.

VIVALDI Violin Concerto in E major RV270 'Il riposo – per il Santissimo Natale'

Allegro | Adagio | Allegro

The short Violin Concerto named 'Il riposo' (Rest) is just one of several concertos by Vivaldi with unusual titles intended to evoke particular atmospheres – other examples include 'Il piacere' (Pleasure, RV180), 'Il sospetto' (Suspicion, RV199) and 'L'inquietudine' (Unrest, RV234). Repose might seem a rather abstract concept to convey in an orchestral work, but Vivaldi brings the notion vividly to life in this gentle, charming piece. The string orchestra is required to play with mutes throughout, and Vivaldi specifically asks that no harpsichord should be used. The result is a hushed, veiled orchestral sound that evokes the idea of rest in an almost theatrical way.

But what about its second title? Despite being described as 'for blessed Christmas', the piece was not originally written as a seasonal concerto. There's still a Christmas connection, however: Vivaldi may have used the piece to depict the sleeping Christ in his lost Christmas oratorio *L'adorazione delli tre Re Magi al Bambino Gesù* of 1722.

This is music of calm reassurance – but pity the poor soloist, whose responsibility it is to make their tricky violin part sound effortless and serene. The first of the Concerto's three short movements contrasts slowly changing orchestral harmonies with a gently caressing melody in the solo violin, which soars to heights of blissful peace in the movement's central section. The brief second movement is hardly more than a slow introduction to the final Allegro, which is full of lightness and transparency, with a certain degree of bubbling energy.

VIVALDI Dixit Dominus in D major, RV594

Dixit Dominus | Donec ponam inimicos tuos | Virgam virtutis tuae

Tecum principium | Juravit Dominus – Tu es sacerdos | Dominus a dextris tuis

Judicabit in nationibus – Implebit ruinas | De torrente | Gloria | Sicut erat in principio

Vivaldi wrote three settings of the Psalm 110 text *Dixit Dominus*, the last of which only came to light in 2005. The RV594 setting, however, is his grandest, and indeed one of the composer's most impressive sacred works, with a rich musical structure and an elaborate scoring for double choir and double orchestra – forces that Vivaldi uses to great effect in a number of special choral and orchestral effects throughout the piece.

Although the *Dixit Dominus*'s precise origins are not known, it may have been written for the convent church of San Lorenzo in Venice or in Damaso in the 1720s or 1730s. The music of its ten short movements is often ostentatiously clever, as though Vivaldi were showing off his compositional skills. The work's harmonic language is rich and broad, and the composer takes his themes through an enormous number of keys with almost mathematical precision. The music itself sounds far from mathematical, though, unfolding instead with a sense of naturalness and inevitability.

The choral opening movement, **Dixit Dominus**, is grand and imposing right from the start, with a sonorous orchestral call to attention, full of bracing rhythms, before the slower-moving vocal parts emerge. The **Donec ponam inimicos tuos**, again for chorus, is characterised by hesitant dotted rhythms, and a remarkable unison passage in the middle of the movement that explores far-off keys. The soprano duet **Virgam virtutis tuae** has a relaxed, almost bucolic feeling, the two singers exchanging graceful phrases, and the subsequent alto solo **Tecum principium** begins with gently pulsing strings, before the assertive vocal line displays some distinctive octave leaps.

Vivaldi puts his double choir and orchestra to good use in the striking antiphonal effects of the **Juravit Dominus – Tu es sacerdos** movement, with material passed back and forth between the two groups. In the ingenious counterpoint later in the movement, voices seem to be chasing each other in all directions. The duet for tenor and bass **Dominus a dextris tuis** has taxing vocal lines set against a fast-moving orchestral backdrop in an evocative description of the wrath of God.

Trumpet fanfares grab our attention in the **Judicabit in nationibus**, and it's here that Vivaldi creates the work's grandest sonic landscape, using organ, a pair of oboes, trumpets and strings. Following some remarkable brass echo effects, a startling central section of the same movement passes the words 'implebit ruinas' back and forth between choirs and orchestras in quick succession to conjure an arresting musical description of God swiftly dispatching unbelievers.

The solo soprano quickly re-establishes calm in the subsequent **De torrente**, with its slowly unfolding string arpeggios, and the penultimate **Gloria** repeats the work's striking opening music in a song of praise to the Holy Trinity. Vivaldi begins his final movement, **Sicut erat in principio**, with a slowly unfolding melody in the male voices, but it soon develops into an elaborate display of florid counterpoint in seven parts, weaving together lines from both choirs and orchestras.

VIVALDI Introduzione al Gloria 'Longe mala, umbrae, terrores' RV640

VIVALDI Introduzione al Gloria 'Ostro picta' RV642

Vivaldi wrote several *introduzioni*, short vocal warm-ups to his larger-scale choral works, including these two pieces intended to be heard before the Gloria RV589. They are sort of musical appetisers to the longer work, announcing and developing some of the themes of its text before the main event, with more florid solo vocal writing and vivacious string accompaniment.

'**Longe mala, umbrae, terrores**' is the darker of the two, a recitative and aria for alto and strings that warns of the terrors of the world and implores the Lord to appear in all His glory. Its tempestuous string opening leaves us in no doubt about its weighty subject matter, and the soloist at first intones slowly before moving on to a more virtuosic display of vocal technique. After a brief contrasting middle section in the major, the stormy opening music returns to take the piece to its dramatic conclusion.

'**Ostro picta**' conjures an entirely different world, contrasting the transient beauties of our earthly existence, represented in the text by a wild rose, with the everlasting glory of the Virgin Mary. Written for solo soprano and strings, and in the form of two arias separated by a short recitative, the piece has similarities with the Gloria itself in its leaping octaves and D major tonality. After the sprightly opening aria, with its heavily decorated vocal line characterised by demanding leaps, a more introspective recitative leads into a graceful, dance-like second aria in three time, full of little turns and scale runs.

VIVALDI Gloria in D major, RV589

Gloria in excelsis Deo | Et in terra pax hominibus | Laudamus te
Gratias agimus tibi – Propter magnam gloriam | Domine Deus, Rex coelestis
Domine Fili unigenite | Domine Deus, Agnus Dei | Qui tollis peccata mundi
Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris | Quoniam tu solus sanctus | Cum Sancto Spiritu

Vivaldi's Gloria RV589 is one of his best-known and best-loved works, but it's actually one of at least three settings he made of the Gloria text. And it's strange to think that, between Vivaldi's death and the early 20th century, the piece remained almost entirely unknown. The score was lost until the 1920s, and the Gloria didn't receive its first revival until 1939, by the Italian composer Alfredo Casella – admittedly in an 'elaborated' version. It wasn't until 1957 that Vivaldi's restored original version was published and performed.

But its sunny nature and its confident, elaborate writing soon gained it a secure place in the choral repertoire. The specific details of the Gloria's composition are not known, but it was probably written around 1715, and was almost certainly one of the earliest sacred works that Vivaldi wrote at the Ospedale della Pietà. It was at that time that his operas were starting to gain popularity, and the Gloria reflects the vitality and theatricality of what was then still a new musical form – as well as allowing the composer to indulge in some glorious contrapuntal displays.

The opening of the **Gloria in excelsis Deo** is one of the most memorable beginnings in all music, with its energetic octave leaps in the orchestra and its choral cries of ecstasy. There's an immediate sense of grandeur and occasion in the monumental choral writing, and the propulsive octaves continue in the orchestra throughout the movement. The second section, **Et in terra pax hominibus**, comes as a complete contrast, evoking profound sadness with its gentle, lilting B minor choral melody against a throbbing string accompaniment.

Two sopranos meet in the **Laudamus te**'s jaunty duet, a piece that wouldn't be out of place in the opera house. The very short *Gratias agimus tibi* serves as an imposing chordal introduction to the imaginative counterpoint of the E minor **Propter magnam gloriam**.

The **Domine Deus, Rex coelestis** is an aria in a gloriously clear C major for soprano with obbligato violin or oboe, in the lilting 12/8 rhythm of a siciliana, a sedate Baroque dance often used to depict melancholy emotions. The F major **Pater fili unigenite** brings the chorus back, with distinctive dotted rhythms characteristic of a French overture.

The slow-moving aria for alto with bass obbligato **Domine Deus, Agnus Dei** is a hushed creation in D minor, with several choral interjections that seem intended to bring the soloist out of their introspection. The **Qui tollis peccata mundi** is a brief, brooding, choral introduction to the alto aria **Qui sedes ad dexteram Patris**, a sprightly song in three time characterised by long held notes in the solo vocal part, in contrast with its scampering string lines.

The penultimate movement, **Quoniam tu solus sanctus**, presents the work's memorable opening music in a simplified form in preparation for its conclusion in the **Con Sancto Spiritu**. This final movement is in fact an arrangement of the ending of a Gloria composed in 1708 by the elder Veronese composer Giovanni Maria Ruggieri, a figure little remembered today but held in high esteem by Vivaldi. The younger composer improved on the original, adding new trumpet parts and emphasising the role of the orchestra, and its sparkling counterpoint brings his Gloria to a suitably celebratory conclusion.

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