

Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico* Violin Concerti Op. 3

Analytical and historical notes

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) was one of the most influential composers of the late Baroque period. He achieved international fame particularly through the publication in 1711¹ of the twelve concerti comprising his Opus 3 collection, to which he gave the fanciful title *L'Estro Armonico* – Harmonic Caprice. Indeed, alongside the Concerti Grossi Op. 6 of his older compatriot, Corelli (actually published posthumously in 1714), Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico* is considered among the most influential publications in music history.

For his third opus, Vivaldi turned for publication to northern Europe, in this case to the French-born Estienne Roger, who worked in Amsterdam. Whereas Italian printers continued to use the old-fashioned system of moveable type – with its irregular staves and unconnected quavers – publishers in Paris, Amsterdam and London had developed the art of 'copperplate' engraving (the actual metal used was a type of pewter – a mixture of lead and tin – which proved more malleable and easier to work than copper). Music impressed from a 'copperplate' engraving was far more elegant and continuous in appearance than type-set music; in some cases publishers even imitated the composer's own manuscript style.

For most of his life Vivaldi was associated with Venice, a resplendent trading city with a richly creative and independent cultural tradition. Claudio Monteverdi, the first great master of the Baroque style in music, had been maestro at the Basilica San Marco in Venice from 1613 until his death in 1643. Vivaldi studied the violin with his father, a violinist at San Marco, and, from an early age, was considered sufficiently skilled to deputise in that professional capacity. Vivaldi also studied for the priesthood and received minor orders in 1703. His ordination and red hair earned him the nick-name "Il Prete Rosso" – The Red Priest. An affliction (now generally considered to be severe asthma) prevented his celebrating mass, and he followed music's calling instead.

In Venice there were a number of orphanages, which were noted for the quality of their educational provision. Vivaldi was employed at one of these, L'Ospedale della Pietà, a girls' orphanage, for much of his career. The pupils gave regular concerts which were widely admired and proved a great tourist attraction. Some of the pupils themselves became notable performers and teachers. Almost certainly, the Op. 3 concerti were intended by Vivaldi to display the skill of his pupils at the Ospedale. The Op. 3 set is organised in a major/minor key order and also by the number of soloists (there are works for one, two and four; some also employ a solo cello). For publication, Vivaldi adopted the following sequence:

Op. 3 No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Key	D	g	G	e	A	a	F	a	D	b	d	E
No. violin soloists:	4*	2*	1	4	2	1	4*	2	1	4	2*	1

(from title page).

*Concerto also include solo cello

In the years around the turn of the eighteenth century – when the instrumental concerto was gradually established – the concept of 'a concerto' was far more fluid than in the later eighteenth century. Music historians frequently describe Vivaldi's Op 3 concerti as "concerti grossi". Vivaldi himself simply described the works according to the number of soloists; even here there are some inconsistencies (for example, Op. 3 No. 1 is titled 'concerto con quattro violini obbligati', though there is also a solo cello part). In the concerto grosso, as established

¹ The concerti were advertised in 1711, and were presumably available then, or shortly after.

by Corelli, perhaps as early as the 1680s, a *concertino* group of three soloists (two violins and cello) is contrasted with a larger section, the *ripieno* string players (both groups being accompanied by their own continuo section). Vivaldi's scoring sometimes reflects the concerto grosso style - though throughout Op. 3 he rather restricts any solo cello writing to brief flourishes. Op. 3 No. 7, in F major, in some ways falls most clearly within the Corelli tradition and is usually regarded as the most retrospective work of the set, presenting a sequence of five movements; furthermore, the material of the last is a direct homage to Corelli.

However, overall, there is a clear trend in *L'Estro Armonico* towards a 'modern' three-movement layout in place of the succession of short, often dance-like movements favoured by Corelli. In practice, Vivaldi presents here a range of styles, from the relatively old-fashioned to the more progressive solo style, and, though for various combinations of performers, he is clearly moving towards the solo concerto, which he effectively established with his next collection of concerti, *La Stravaganza*, Op. 4.

Vivaldi presented *L'Estro Armonico* in a set of eight part-books: Violins I-IV, Violas I & II, Cello, and 'Violone e Cembalo'.² The violone was a type of large bass viol, sounding an octave below written pitch (like a double bass); the cembalo (harpsichord) player would improvise chords over this bass line according to the figured bass numerals indicated in the part book. Thus a minimum of nine players is required, and it seems probable that this is the size of ensemble which Vivaldi intended. There is some ambiguity over the significance of the indication 'solo' in these concerti. Some earlier published concerti had compressed both the solo and ensemble ('reinforza' or 'ripieno') parts onto a single staff; in such cases, the instruction 'solo' obviously indicated that just one performer was to play. However, Vivaldi's configuration of part books - especially in the works for one or two soloists - effectively provides separate part books for the 'reinforcing' players, and so, in this context, 'solo' is more of an indication that the part is no longer duplicated in another part book. This interpretation is confirmed by Vivaldi's frequent use of the indication 'soli', which indicates to the performers that they are now part of a group of soloists.³

One somewhat more old-fashioned feature of Vivaldi's instrumentation is the inclusion of two viola parts. However, in practice the viola parts rarely diverge - again No. 7 being the most obvious exception, with two relatively independent viola lines - elsewhere, the two part books probably indicate the number of players required to balance the four violins effectively. Within the full ensemble, the viola line usually provides an independent inner voice. In some slow movements, the violas play the accompanying bass line in unison with the violins. Except for the occasional solo passages, the solo cello is usually doubled by the continuo part (and in this edition they have been compressed onto a single line). Another intriguing detail is the occasional divergence of cello and bass lines (for example, in No. 8, at bar 9 in the first movement). Although such passages are brief, they reveal an interesting development in techniques of instrumentation.

² To be precise, each instrumental part was published in two separate volumes, for concerti 1-6 and 7-12. In the present edition, the Cello and Continuo parts (which are usually identical) have been amalgamated onto a single staff.

³ For further clarification, compare the present edition with the otherwise excellent Dover edition of *L'Estro Armonico*, where the indication 'soli' in the original has usually been replaced by 'solo' and the relevant part has been adapted to accommodate additional ripieno players. Taking this type of editing (ie. assuming that each line should be reinforced by additional players) to extremes has led to some remarkable editions; see, for instance, the extract from Op. 3. No 10 (Larghetto) quoted in Robbins Landon, *Vivaldi, Voice of the Baroque*, p. 45, where the four violin parts have been replaced by eight (violin I solo, violin II doubled by V and VI, violin II doubled by VII and IV by VIII).

L'Estro Armonico marks a significant advance in the development of 'ritornello form' – the most intricate tonal and structural process of the high Baroque. Ritornello form – in which a short theme returns (usually truncated and in different keys) periodically throughout the movement – had been explored since the beginning of the Baroque (in its simplest form, it was an instrumental refrain between the verses of a song). Giuseppi Torelli (1658-1709) had established (for example, in his Op 8 concertos) the principle whereby a ritornello theme played by the whole ensemble (the 'tutti' section) was contrasted with more lightly scored solo episodes, based mainly on violinistic figuration. Vivaldi built on this tradition, but worked out his ritornello theme more thoroughly, and treated the solo episodes as an opportunity to develop motives from the main theme. He usually lightened the texture during the solo episodes, but rarely to just the continuo players. Thus Vivaldi's structure became both more elaborate and more cohesive.

The eighth concerto provides a particularly illuminating example of ritornello form.⁴ The ritornello theme of the first movement exhibits a characteristic Vivaldian tripartite structure: the opening 'head motif' with its emphatic tonic and dominant chording; the sequence in bars 6-8 built over a circle of fifths in the bass (D-G-C-F-B-E) combined with a sequence of suspended sevenths - a quintessentially Vivaldi fingerprint; and the closing theme in anguished quavers, first over a dominant pedal, then exploiting chromaticisms (a Neapolitan 6th chord, start of b. 14, and then a descending chromatic bass).

Vivaldi breaks up these elements and reassembles them around the solo episodes. The episodes mostly derive from bars 4 and 5, which already incorporate brief solo interjections within the tutti theme. The mid-point of the movement is represented by the climactic descending chordal figuration in bars 44-45 which outlines a V9 chord in the key of the dominant. After briefly cadencing in the dominant minor (E minor bar 47) Vivaldi moves abruptly to the subdominant (D minor, bar 48), an unusual type of modulation known as a real or 'rosalia' sequence. This leads to the head motif in D minor, after which elements from the first "half" are reviewed in a different order. For example, the solo episode from bar 48, reappears in A minor (b86) sandwiched between two statements of the chromatic closing phrase (b84 and b 90).

The slow movement of Concerto No. 8 is built over an ostinato bass. Vivaldi characterises this movement with the extraordinarily evocative indication "Larghetto e spiritoso". The strings set the theme out in octaves in the first four bars. This is subsequently treated as a ground bass: the violas and violins repeat the motif in unison, above which the solo violins weave a serene cantabile melody around the spare harmonic outline. Finally the opening recurs, again in octaves, but this time *Forte e Spiritoso*.

The vigorous unison writing is continued in the ritornello theme of the finale, after a brief imitative introduction. The solo episodes here are much less closely derived from the main thematic material than those of the first movement. Perhaps most remarkable is the unexpected blossoming of a cantabile melody (*Solo e Forte*, b87) in the second solo violin. Against this, the first soloist decorates the prevailing chords in semiquavers (*piano*). Possibly the clear distinction in roles between the two soloists reflected the particular players Vivaldi had in mind. It certainly illustrates his extraordinary imaginative approach to the Baroque concerto. The cantabile melody itself in some ways looks ahead to the galant style of the mid-eighteenth century, which becomes increasingly evident in Vivaldi's later music.

Numerous diary accounts attest to the enthusiastic reception of Vivaldi's music by contemporary audiences. Its impact on other composers was also far-reaching. While visiting Amsterdam in 1713, Prince Johann Ernst from the court of Weimar – himself an accomplished musician – discovered Vivaldi's new music and brought it to the eager attention

⁴ For a tabular presentation, see Appendix II of Robbins Landon, *Vivaldi, Voice of the Baroque*.

of his chapel organist. The organist was J.S. Bach and Vivaldi's *L'Estro Armonico* made a profound and lasting impression on his own compositional technique. Not only did Bach derive his concerto style from Vivaldi's, but the structural principles enshrined provided the basis for some of his greatest choral works.

Following the Opus 3 Concerti, Vivaldi continued to publish further works until about 1729. Subsequently, he preferred to retain scores in manuscript and sell "autograph" copies. In Venice the novelty of his style seems to have subsided, as fashion moved on. Elsewhere his fame continued to grow. He was, for example, guest of honour at the centenary celebrations of a major theatre in Amsterdam in 1738. Seeking out new horizons, in 1740 he set out for Austria, where he had royal contacts. Despite the wealth he had amassed, when Vivaldi died in Vienna in 1741 he was apparently impoverished. His style and music were soon forgotten. But since the 1950s, a wave of rediscovery has won for Vivaldi a far wider audience than even he could have imagined.

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Further Reading:

<i>The Baroque Concerto</i>	Arthur Hutchings	(Faber 1959/1978)
<i>Vivaldi</i>	Michael Talbot	(BBC Music Guide 1979)
<i>Baroque Music</i>	Claude V. Palisca	(Prentice-Hall 1981)
<i>Vivaldi</i>	Michael Talbot	(Master Musicians 1984)
<i>Vivaldi: Voice of the Baroque</i>	H.C. Robbins Landon	(Harper Collins 1993)
<i>A History of the Concerto</i>	Michael Thomas Roeder	(Amadeus 1994)
<i>Antonio Vivaldi: the Red Priest of Venice</i>	Karl Heller	(Amadeus 1997)
<i>Arcangelo Corelli</i>	Peter Allsop	(OUP 1999)
<i>L'Estro Armonico</i> , Op. 3	Antonio Vivaldi Ed. Eleanor Selfridge-Field and Edmund Correia	(Dover 1999)