

The literal, but hardly idiomatic translation of Antonio Vivaldi's *Estro armonico*, Op. 3, is "harmonic estrus," but a better sense of Vivaldi's meaning might be "harmonic fancy" (coined by the late Christopher Hogwood) or just "harmonic inspiration." Whichever you prefer, Vivaldi's Op. 3 was his first published collection of concertos and the first time he departed from the generic and more usual titles of the period, such as "12 sonatas for violin and continuo." These concertos, plus the Sinfonia and Concerto for Two Cellos also featured on this program, are products of Vivaldi's musical positions with the Venetian Ospedale della Pietà, a founding hospital for abandoned and illegitimate girls. As *maestro di violino* there (and later, *maestro de' concerti*), he taught violin and oversaw the acquisition and care of its string instruments. In addition to his specified duties he also composed music to be performed by the girls of the Pietà, mainly in its public church services and concerts. His more than 500 concertos, dominated by those for strings, is the legacy, not only of his decades-long service there, but also of the

musical abilities of these Venetian orphan girls.

Vivaldi marked his Op. 3 as particularly special, neatly arranging the pieces in major-minor pairings and according to the number of violin soloists in a 4, 2, 1 pattern, and with that now-famous title, *Estro armonico*. His advertising proved effective, even prophetic, because these concertos are arguably the most influential instrumental works of the 18th century. First printed in Amsterdam in 1711, they were reprinted, in whole or in part, some twenty times there during the first half of the century; multiple printings in Paris and London account for still more editions. Vivaldi's *Estro armonico* also circulated in manuscript copies, and a young Konzertmeister in Weimar, Johann Sebastian Bach, got ahold of a copy and made transcriptions of half its concertos, three for harpsichord and strings, two for organ and strings, and one, uniquely, for four harpsichords and strings. This proved a watershed moment for Bach, who learned what he called a kind of "musical thinking" from Vivaldi's musical forms, in

particular, the distribution of musical ideas between soloists and ensemble. That influence can be heard in Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*, which are featured by Mercury later this season, but similar examples of Vivaldi's influence can also be heard in Bach contemporaries, such as Georg Philipp Telemann, Johann Mattheson, and Johann David Heinichen.

At the heart of Vivaldi's concerto design is the ritornello form (i.e., refrain form) he used, in which a distinctive and memorable refrain theme for the full ensemble (or the tutti) alternates with more varied and often virtuosic solos. The main theme in Vivaldi's ritornello form could vary widely from concerto to concerto: in the first movement of N° 9, the mood is bright and majestic with its procession-like ritornello, while the driving eighth-notes of the first movement of N° 8 create a tense, insistent mood; the refrain of the finale of N° 1 evokes lively and light-hearted dancing with its gigue-like music, while the fugal refrain in the second movement of N° 11 seems solemn, even severe in its disciplined counterpoint.

The slow movements—usually the middle movement within Vivaldi's typical three-movement plan—also frequently use ritornello form, but one in which there are fewer refrains, sometimes just as an opening and conclusion. These are often poignant movements, such as when a stern-sounding refrain for unison strings contrasts with a lyrical, pleading solo, as in the slow movements of N° 1 and N° 8. In the Largo e spiccato movement of N° 11, the character of a siciliano predominates within this most serenely tuneful of Vivaldian concerto movements.

The relationship of the solos to these anchoring refrains can also vary in Vivaldi's plan. The solos themselves are not usually melodious. You won't hear anything comparable to, say, the Brahms Lullaby or, closer to home, the Bach "Air On the G String." Instead, Vivaldi relies on repeated patterns of arpeggiation, bariolage, scales, or some combination of these that create the driving, energized style that suffuses his music. These solos, whether featuring violinists or cellists and whether one, two, or four soloists, are

often unrelated to the thematic material of the refrains (Nº 8, 1st movement), but in some cases the initial solo takes a motif from the tutti refrain as a point of departure (Nº 6, 1st movement). In the second movement of Nº 11, however, the tight coherence of its fugal movement extends to the unusually close thematic relationship between tutti refrain and solos in which they share the fugue subject throughout.

A further point bears mentioning about the organization of thematic material in Vivaldi's ritornello forms: in some instances, he might do away with either the tutti refrain or the intervening solos and yet still preserve the structure of a concerto ritornello form. The opening piece on the program, the Sinfonia in G Minor, has no soloists and is called a *sinfonia* here for that reason. Yet Vivaldi labeled it a concerto in his manuscript, probably because the full group plays both refrain-like and solo-like material, so that he thought of it, perhaps paradoxically, as a concerto in which the full ensemble functions as soloist. By contrast, the slow second movement of

the Concerto for Two Cellos features no tutti passages; the whole of the movement is just the soloists with basso continuo accompaniment. Yet the opening ascending arpeggio returns twice in the movement, as if it were a ritornello motto but played by soloists.

Still further nuances of thematic material and scoring can be heard in the tutti ritornellos that include brief solo interjections, as in the first movements of Concerto Nº 1, Concerto Nº 10, and the Concerto for Two Cellos. The larger picture of Vivaldi's concertos, then, is unified by his frequent use of ritornello form, on the one hand, but diversified by the many approaches that he took in handling its tutti refrains and solo episodes, on the other. Knowing that much, we can understand that he was able to produce over 500 such concertos by employing a basic form throughout, but also that he kept his approach to it fresh by varying it endlessly.

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