

# Program Notes

The *Ospedale della Pietà* (Hospice of Mercy) was an orphanage for the education and care of girls, and it emphasized training in music. First a violin teacher at the *Pietà*, Vivaldi later obtained the position of musical director, where he worked (on and off) until 1740. Thanks to him, the music program became exceptionally successful. Every Sunday, the orchestra and choir of the *Pietà* offered public performances of Vivaldi's music for the city's elite, and eventually, its outstanding musical events became one of the city's main attractions. Charles de Brosses, a French traveler in Venice, reported in 1739 that "there is nothing so charming as to see a young and pretty nun in her white robe, with a bouquet of pomegranate flowers over her ear, leading the orchestra and beating time with all the grace and precision imaginable."

Most of Vivaldi's music was intended for performance at the *Ospedale della Pietà*, and so it was performed entirely by women. His concertos were specifically written for his female students, all exceptional musicians and performers. His orchestra there seems to have consisted of twenty to twenty-five stringed instruments with a harpsichord or organ. Many of Vivaldi's concertos, however, call for other instruments, such as flutes, oboes, and horns, which the women at the *Pietà* also played. This is the case for the two double concertos in our program: the festive-sounding Concerto in D major RV 563 that survives as a concerto for two trumpets and also as a concerto for two oboes, but which is performed tonight by one trumpet and one oboe (as Vivaldi may have also had it performed), and the Concerto for Oboe and Violin in B flat major RV 548, whose slower, emotional, and quasi-mournful largo provides a stunning contrast with the piece's brighter first and third movements. Both are in the three-movement concerto form—fast–slow–fast—that Vivaldi helped establish, and which later became standard in Classical music.

Vivaldi's sacred vocal works *Laetatus Sum*, *Magnificat*, and *Gloria* were in all likelihood composed for the women at the *Pietà*, where, according to de Brosses, not only were people best entertained but also people could hear women sing "like angels." The shortest of these three pieces is the lively setting of psalm 121: the *Laetatus Sum* in F major RV 697, for choir, strings, and continuo. "Laetatus Sum" is one of fifteen "Songs

of Ascent" from the Book of Psalms that narrate the pilgrims' journey to Jerusalem, and its joyful music helps convey their enthusiasm and unrelenting faith. The "Magnificat," in contrast, is a bible canticle sung at the end of Vespers, in which Mary praises God, as she prepares to become the mother of the Messiah. Composed sometime between 1717 and 1719, and revised in the 1720s, Vivaldi's *Magnificat* in G minor RV 610 consists of nine musical numbers, each corresponding to one section of the "Magnificat" poem. Each number is different in terms of its mood, key, tempo, or texture. For example, the lively "Et exultavit spiritus emus" in B flat major ("My spirit rejoices," no. 2) is followed by a mournful and much slower choral "Et misericordia ejus" in C minor ("He has mercy," no. 3). Similarly, Vivaldi maximizes contrast of these musical elements, as well as mood, in his *Gloria* in D major RV 589. This sacred vocal work composed around 1715 consists of twelve musical numbers, four of which require soloists. Vivaldi's powerful and joyful opening number "Gloria," perhaps one of the most memorable sections in this well-known sacred work, beautifully captures the jubilant mood of the *Gloria*—a celebratory passage in the Catholic Mass praising God the Father and Christ.

The *Gloria*, the only one of these three sacred works demonstrably composed for the *Pietà*, is written for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. How, one may ask, were the lower parts (traditionally sung by men) performed at this institution? Women who sang sacred music, as in the *Pietà*, were not allowed to share choir lofts with men, so they would have had to sing the lower parts. Contraltos would have sung Vivaldi's tenor parts, all of which lie comfortably within the low contralto range, and women with exceptionally low voices would have sung the bass parts. Indeed, a few surviving documents of the time refer to a handful of female singers at the *Pietà* as "tenors" or "bass singers." Tenor and bass parts were sung at notated pitch or, as in tonight's performance, transposed up an octave.

Like all his other musical compositions, Vivaldi's works for the famous all-female choir and orchestra of the *Ospedale della Pietà* disappeared following the composer's death in 1741 and were believed lost until their (accidental) discovery in the 1920s. Nonetheless, Antonio Vivaldi conquered modern audiences, becoming one of the most performed and recorded composers in history.

—Maria Virginia Acuña