BMC 36 - VIVALDI-BACH: Concerto Transcriptions for Harpsichord

Antonio Vivaldi was born in Venice on March 4th, 1678. Though ordained a priest in 1703, within a year of being ordained – according to his own account – he no longer wished to celebrate mass because of physical complaints ("tightness of the chest") which pointed to angina pectoris, asthmatic bronchitis, or a nervous disorder. It is also possible that Vivaldi was simulating illness – there is a story that he sometimes left the altar in order quickly to jot down a musical idea in the sacristy.... In any event he had become a priest against his own will, perhaps because, in his day, training for the priesthood was often the only possible way for a poor family to obtain free schooling.

Vivaldi was employed for most of his working life by the Ospedale della Pietà. Often termed an "orphanage", this Ospedale was in fact a home for the female offspring of noblemen and their numerous dalliances with their mistresses. The Ospedale was thus well endowed by the "anonymous" fathers; its furnishings bordered on the opulent, the young ladies were well looked-after, and the musical standards among the highest in Venice. Many of Vivaldi's Concerti would have been performed before Venetian audiences with his many talented pupils.

In 1711 twelve new Concerto compositions were published in Amsterdam by the music publisher Estienne Roger under the title *l'Estro armonico* (Harmonic Inspiration). This was to be the start of an important alliance which greatly expedited the dissemination of Vivaldi's music throughout Europe. *L'estro armonico* was followed by *La stravaganza* in 1714, Duo and Trio Sonatas, Op. 5 in 1716, the two collections of *Concerti a 5 stromenti,* Op. 6/7 in 1716-17, *1l cimento dell' armonia e dell'inventione* containing the Four Seasons concertos op 8 in 1725, *La cetra,* Op. 9 – dedicated to Emperor Charles VI in 1727, the first complete set of Flute Concertos ever to be published appeared in 1728 as Op. 10, and the String Concertos, Op. 11/12 followed in 1729.

Though Italy is generally accepted as the birthplace of Baroque music, it remained backward in terms of music-printing. Though Italy had pioneered the printing of lined music manuscript paper, actual scores were still printed using movable type, which was expensive, cumbersome, and too inflexible to reproduce clearly all the ties and other markings which are essential if the composer is to convey his intentions to performers with any degree of accuracy.

Furthermore, printers were naturally unwilling to keep large blocks of type "standing", tying up a substantial investment in wood and lead So after printing, the type was dismantled, and had to be re-set for any further reprints. Far superior in terms of cost, durability and above all legibility was the process of engraving music onto copper plates, and this process was developed, not in Italy, but in London by John Walsh and in Amsterdam by Estienne Roger.

Not only did these firms provide a printing service; they also acted as publishers and distributors. Whereas previously composers would need to find wealthy patrons to finance the printing of their scores then attend to their own distribution through personal friends and contacts, it now became possible for composers to have their scores printed and published at little or no cost to themselves, with the promise of royalties to follow. When, in 1711 Vivaldi, who had previously had two works printed in Italy, sent his third, *L'estro armonico*, directly to Roger in Amsterdam – with a few disparaging remarks about Italian printers in the foreword – he set an example which other composers would quickly follow. Albinoni for example, published his Oboe Concertos Op.7 with Roger in 1715. Thus the quantity and choice of printed and published editions available throughout Europe was vastly increased. Another interesting side-effect was to spread Italian music throughout northern Europe, causing Italian composers to write for a wider musical taste.

Estienne Roger was perhaps the best-known, and almost certainly the best-organized printer/publisher of the Baroque era. Born in 1665 or 1666 of a French Huguenot refugee family, Roger began his music printing business in Amsterdam in 1697, enhancing and widening his reputation mainly through the high quality of his copper engraving and processing, always remaining in the forefront of current printing techniques. Numbering among his regular clients such great Baroque names as Vivaldi, Albinoni, Corelli, Alessandro Scarlatti, Lully, Lebègue, and Marin Marais, he provided not only some of Europe's highest quality printing, but also a well-organized Europe-wide distribution and information system. Roger numbered his editions (about 500) and the books in stock, and issued catalogs between 1698 and 1716 which were distributed abroad and reprinted in newspapers. He authorized agents in Rotterdam, Liège and Brussels, London, Cologne, Hamburg, Halle, Berlin and Leipzig to sell his editions. Thus Bach in later years would have been able to browse the catalog, possibly review scores, and order any which interested him in his own city of Leipzig. There is no doubt however, that from his earliest years, Bach was able without difficulty to familiarize himself with the music of all the great composers, both his contemporaries and their illustrious predecessors.

Bach's transcriptions, for solo organ or harpsichord, of Concertos by Vivaldi and other masters were made during his period at the Court of Weimar between 1708 and 1717.

Weimar was quite a small town with only 5000 inhabitants; yet Bach was to meet some very cultured people here. Not least was his employer, the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar, one of the most distinguished and cultured nobles of his time. Bach's two-fold position as member of the chamber orchestra and as Organist to the Court offered him many opportunities for improvement. The Court Orchestra consisted of about 22 players: a compact string ensemble, a bassoon player, 6 or 7 trumpeters and a timpanist. Bach's function in the orchestra was mainly as a violinist, however he also played the harpsichord and wrote or arranged some of the music. As was the custom

in most 18th century Courts, the musicians also spent some of their time employed in household and domestic duties.

It has generally been accepted that Bach's transcriptions were simply learning exercises. However the level of composition already reached and evidenced in his Weimar instrumental and organ works, as well as those of earlier years, hardly shows need for simple transcription as a means of further education. More likely was the challenge of accurately transforming an orchestral concerto, with its alternation of soloists and full orchestra, into a work for solo instrument, albeit a two manual harpsichord with its ability to couple keyboards for a *tutti* effect. This would have been an interesting and amusing way for Bach and his fellow musicians to familiarize themselves with the currently fashionable compositions without the need for orchestral parts and the gathering of the full band. The technique of rendering an orchestral form as a solo harpsichord piece would be re-visited many years later at Leipzig with the Italian Concerto, BWV 971.

Further evidence that these concertos were mature works rather than mere exercises can be found in Bach's treatment, as Sylvia Marlowe has observed:

"It is interesting and instructive to place side by side one of Vivaldi's original Concerti and Bach's transcription of it. The Vivaldi score for solo violin, *ripieno* strings (that is, a string orchestra for "filling out"), and continuo (that is, a keyboard instrument to supply the basic harmonies) is condensed by Bach into a simple score for keyboard solo.

"While this condensation is going on, a compensating expansion occurs on another level. Bach makes the bass more active, enlivens the inner parts, supplements the original solo violin passages with new counterpoints, paraphrases certain violinistic effects with equivalents in the keyboard idiom, writes out the embellishments (trills, mordents, slides, etc.) that the Italians left almost entirely to the discretion of the performer. In short, Bach does not give us literal translations but artistic adaptations. The Concerti became genuine clavier pieces, '*to be played with no less delight and pleasure than Bach's original creations*' as Bach's biographer Philipp Spitta observed."

All of the Six Concerti are in three movements: the outer movements fast, the inner ones slow. The course of the music is always marked by signposts – for example, changes of harpsichord registration indicating the shift from solo to tutti passages. Bach has occasionally changed Vivaldi's keys in order to make the music "lie well" on the keyboard.

In performing these Concerti, Sylvia Marlowe follows the eighteenth-century tradition of still further elaborating the music with inventions of her own. At times, she supplies harmonies where the texture is thin, omits them where certain acoustical situations make the textures too thick, arpeggiates the grand chordal sonorities, ornaments the melodies, and elaborates the final cadences with extended broken chords. All of this is in accordance with the conventions of performance in Bach's time. Bach himself is reported to have been wonderfully imaginative in his enrichment of the written page, with his own music as well as that of other composers. This convention survived for many years – it seems certain that some of the piano parts in Mozart's Concerti were mere outlines that he elaborated in actual performance.

As Spitta warns, we should not let the beauty of these transcriptions lead us to undervalue Vivaldi's own genius. Bach worked over the Italian's music because he admired it, no doubt recognizing too that it was largely Vivaldi's pioneering work which brought the concerto to full maturity in Italy. In the Bach-Vivaldi relationship, we see the meeting of two cultures, German and Italian, which happily resulted in the enrichment of Bach's genius to the point where it achieved universality.

We have also included two of Vivaldi's original Concertos as an interesting comparison with the later Bach Harpsichord transcriptions.