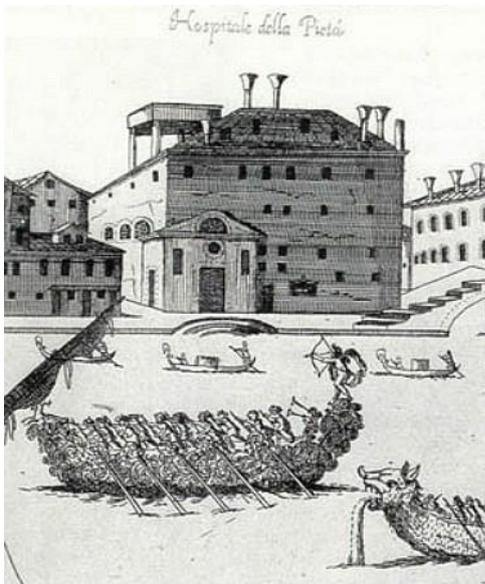


Vivaldi and the Women in his Life

Antonio Vivaldi was born in Venice in 1678: He trained for the priesthood (a recognised way of gaining a good free education) and was ordained in 1703, but was scarcely active as a priest. For health reasons? Had music become too important to him? Or were there other factors?

Vivaldi began his association with Venice's Ospedale della Pietà in 1703, continuing with some breaks until 1740. There were four Ospedali in Venice, covering a wider range of charitable social care than our term "hospital" implies: the Pietà was in theory a home for abandoned babies, although many of its charges were the unscheduled outcome of illicit aristocratic relationships (explaining the strong financial support it received?). A plaque on the wall of its church threatens damnation on parents trying to pass their children off as orphans to gain admission for them: sharp practice to get children into 'good' schools may be nothing new.

Contrary to popular belief, the Pietà was not just for girls: however only girls could receive a musical education. Newborn babies would be fostered with local families until the age of about six; its boys would be trained for trades such as stonecutting, weaving and shoemaking, and would in time leave to earn their living; the girls would be assigned either to the Figlie di Comun (receiving a typical domestic training for girls of the time), or to the Figlie di Choro, who received an intensive musical education (but who would not miss out on domestic duties). The Choro girls would lose any surname they might have had, being labelled by their instrument or voice-type (e.g. 'Anna Maria dal Violin').



The Pietà musicians never performed outside its walls, and even when inside were placed behind screens: doubtless young men in the audiences at Pietà concerts imagined a group of beautiful young ladies playing and singing. The writer Jean-Jacques Rousseau (admittedly, writing well after Vivaldi's time) was given the chance to meet some of the Choro girls and reported that many were either unattractive or disfigured (e.g. with smallpox scars). Not all would have been young: the only exits for the Pietà girls were via matrimony or the nunnery, and some, including Meneghina dalla Viola, still playing at 68, had clearly taken neither path. The older women often acted as tutors to the younger girls (well, it saved on salaried teachers); while female singers might join opera companies, there were no career

possibilities for female instrumentalists, so Meneghina and her like would have had a safe if unspectacular life within the Pietà. Between them, the Choro girls were skilled on a wide range of instruments, and invoices for repairs show that their instruments were of good quality.

How would an all-female choir have coped with the Soprano/Alto/Tenor/ Bass arrangement of Vivaldi's Gloria? Some Pietà were trained to sing lower notes, possibly simply singing an octave higher if the part went too low. The conductor Andrew Parrott has recorded a version with an all-female chorus in which the 'Tenors' and 'Basses' simply take their entire lines an octave higher.

As well as instrumental and choral music, Vivaldi wrote operas (94, by one account, although many are lost). We have no substantiated reports of suspicious behaviour with the Pietà girls, but his connections with the singer Anna Giraud raised some eyebrows. Several of his operas were written for her voice (although critics did not rate her talent particularly highly). Anna shared his house (as a housekeeper, Vivaldi claimed), and accompanied him on some of his travels. We will probably never discover their exact relationship, but it raises one thought: since the Catholic Church insists on clerical celibacy, was this the deciding factor which made priesthood unattractive for him?

(adapted from an article in the programme of Highworth Choral Society's December 2005 concert)