



*Or che d'orrido Verno* represents Porpora's typical melodic style, whose chief characteristics Aresi says are 'refinement, subtle interplay between the parts, and highly intensive (at times obsessive) exploitation of the thematic material' (CD booklet, 4). It is in this cantata's challenging aria 'Lungi dal ben che s'ama' that a number of vocal imperfections (which are otherwise rare) become noticeable. The long melisma that the score in Naples (I-Nc 34.6.25(7)) ascribes to the stressed syllable in the word 'sento' at the end of part A (and in the da capo) is sung by Fedi with a closed, practically incomprehensible vowel (similar to an 'i') that is impossible to understand without the score. Another questionable moment occurs at the start of the da capo section in the aria 'Amami e non languir', which Fedi begins by jumping to an extremely high pitch that clashes with the more measured range displayed in the other arias.

One wonders what the result would have been like had the selection of cantatas been different. The least interesting cantata on the disc is *Già la notte s'avvicina*: even though it sets a fine text by Metastasio, in the recitative 'Lascia una volta, oh Nice' we miss some of the harmonic daring that often underlines the expressive character of the other recitatives recorded here. These recitatives normally contain traits of light word-painting, as in 'di pianti e dogli' in the second recitative of *Or sì m'avveggo* and the words 'minaccia' and 'ahì' in the introductory recitative of *Or che d'orrido Verno*. In all other respects, *Già la notte* seems to have been written for the training of singers rather than for general public entertainment. The two arias are defined by features that were – and still are – the main concerns of vocal pedagogy: 'making the *passaggio* at the break', according to Sutton, and 'uniting as smoothly as possible the registers of the voice' ('The Solo Vocal Works of Nicola Porpora', 50).

An alternative means of selecting the programme for any future recording of Porpora's cantatas would be to choose the most outstanding works from a single manuscript collection, such as I-Nc 34.6.25, for example. This Naples source comprises a set of cantatas (almost all of them by Porpora) with a stylistic variety similar to that sought after for this Hyperion CD, and it has the advantage of having been compiled by a connoisseur whose taste was nearer than ours to eighteenth-century norms. Judging from the interest in Porpora's music that Auser Musici's performance is arousing, another CD with more cantatas will surely be issued soon.

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FRANCESCO NAVARA (*fl.* 1695–1699), COMPOSER X (*fl.* c1695),  
GIOVANNI LEGRENZI (1626–1690), TOMASO ALBINONI (1671–1751),  
GIUSEPPE VALENTINI (c1680–c1760), ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)

*THE RISE OF THE NORTH ITALIAN VIOLIN CONCERTO, 1690–1740*

*VOLUME 1. THE DAWN OF THE VIRTUOSO*

Adrian Chandler (violin), Mhairi Lawson (soprano)/La Serenissima/Adrian Chandler

Avie AV2106, 2006; one disc, 78 minutes

ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741)

*THE RISE OF THE NORTH ITALIAN VIOLIN CONCERTO, 1690–1740*

*VOLUME 2. ANTONIO VIVALDI: VIRTUOSO IMPRESARIO*

Adrian Chandler (violin), Mhairi Lawson (soprano), Sarah McMahon (violoncello), Gareth Deats (violoncello)/

La Serenissima/Adrian Chandler

Avie AV2128, 2007; one disc, 77 minutes



ANTONIO VIVALDI (1678–1741), PIETRO LOCATELLI (1695–1764),  
GIOVANNI BATTISTA SAMMARTINI (1700/1701–1775), GIUSEPPE TARTINI  
(1692–1770)

*THE RISE OF THE NORTH ITALIAN VIOLIN CONCERTO, 1690–1740*

VOLUME 3. *THE GOLDEN AGE*

Adrian Chandler (violin)/La Serenissima/Adrian Chandler

Avie AV2154, 2008; one disc, 80 minutes

This collection of three compact discs charting the development of the north Italian violin concerto between 1690 and 1740 presents the results of Adrian Chandler's three-year Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts at the University of Southampton, which was funded by the United Kingdom's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). This series of recordings is a powerful argument for the importance of the AHRC's fellowships, as it presents a repertory of previously little-known and, in many cases, unrecorded works in highly persuasive performances. It also shows that in spite of the recent rise of new Italian groups promoting Vivaldi's music, not least his operas, the United Kingdom can provide stiff competition: La Serenissima under Chandler's direction gives lively, colourful performances, eschewing the extreme mannerisms of wild dynamic contrasts and eccentric tempos that have marred some recent Vivaldi recordings.

The development of the early eighteenth-century concerto is often studied and understood primarily through the works of Antonio Vivaldi, Johann Sebastian Bach and George Frideric Handel; while this set focuses entirely on Vivaldi for its middle disc, the other two discs provide valuable context by including works by some of his contemporaries. North Italy, with its great centres of violin-making in Cremona and Brescia, was an important site of the violin's organological development, and its composers were equally important in fostering the emerging genre of the violin concerto. Volume 1, *The Dawn of the Virtuoso*, contains two works for five-part strings by Francesco Navara, maestro di cappella at Mantua from 1695. These survive in manuscripts now housed in Durham Cathedral Library (a source of a number of interesting works from this period, including some for trumpet and strings). While their structure of four alternating slow and fast movements, together with the imitative writing between the violins, brings Arcangelo Corelli to mind, there are some original traits, including the adventurous harmonic writing in the third movement of the A minor work. Equally unfamiliar is the *Laudate pueri* accredited to 'Composer X', which is one of thirteen anonymous sacred vocal works in the same hand belonging to Vivaldi's library now housed in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Turin. These are part of a wider group of nineteen works containing annotations in Vivaldi's hand, from which he borrowed material for his own works, most famously in the closing movements of the *Glorias* RV588 and 589. While many of these Turin works are for four or five voices plus the typical Venetian five-part string ensemble, this *Laudate pueri*, RV Anh. 30, is for solo soprano and no doubt provided the model for Vivaldi's own settings of this psalm for the same voice. However, as Chandler points out in the informative accompanying notes, the style of Composer X's setting tends to be retrospective rather than progressive; many of the sections open with passages for voice and continuo alone, in a manner that is sometimes reminiscent of Claudio Monteverdi's psalm settings, and are then rounded off by short instrumental postludes.

This first disc includes works by other composers who influenced Vivaldi, including Giovanni Legrenzi. Although there is no evidence to corroborate the claim that Legrenzi, who was living in Venice by 1670, actually gave violin lessons to the young Vivaldi (who was only twelve years old when Legrenzi died), there can be no doubt that Vivaldi would have been influenced by him. One of the city's leading musicians, Legrenzi was elected maestro di cappella of St Mark's in 1685, and would have worked closely with Vivaldi's father Giovanni Battista, who began to appear on the cappella's payroll this same year. Legrenzi is represented in this recording by three balletti (dance movements) and three correnti from his posthumous Op. 16, a collection that was published by his nephew in 1691. The first corrente here is in fact a gigue, and the third a French-style rondeau, while all the works are for the typical north Italian five-part string ensemble with alto and tenor violas.



The remaining two composers on this disc are more forward-looking. Tomaso Albinoni was a key figure in the development of the Venetian concerto, being the first to use regular solo passages and the familiar three-movement fast–slow–fast form. His Op. 2 comprises a set of sonatas in five parts and concertos in six parts. The Concerto Op. 2 No. 8, more than other works in the set, focuses on solo writing and, like Vivaldi's Op. 3, uses a solo cello as well as a violin. Giuseppe Valentini was important in introducing a virtuoso element into the concerto. His Concerto Op. 7 No. 3 from 1710, while harking back to the Roman concerto grosso in its multi-movement format, looks forward to Vivaldi's Op. 3 *L'estro armonico* of the following year in terms of the technical demands of its solo writing – especially when the third movement is taken as fast as it is in this performance – as well as in its scoring for four solo violins, although Valentini's lengthy fugal second movement could never be confused with the work of Vivaldi.

Two concertos by Vivaldi, Op. 3 No. 10 for four violins and Op. 3 No. 3 for one soloist, are the only familiar repertory recorded here and provide a chronological link in both directions. Their use of two separate viola parts looks back to Legrenzi and Albinoni, while the elements of virtuosic display and the three-movement pattern look forward to the works of the mature Vivaldi. One such work by Vivaldi is explored on the second disc of the series, *Antonio Vivaldi: Virtuoso Impresario*, an attractive and unfamiliar selection of repertory that immediately refutes the oft-quoted cliché that Vivaldi composed the same concerto hundreds of times over. The Concerto for Violin, Strings and Continuo in E flat major, RV254, opens with explosive dynamic contrasts, which are nicely exploited in this performance, while the fine Concerto *senza cantin* for Violin, Strings and Continuo in D minor, RV243, adds an extra element of virtuosity by instructing the soloist not to use the E string and by tuning the lowest string up by a tone to create greater resonance in multiple-stopped chords. Several of the pieces on this disc have an operatic connection. The Concerto for Violin, Strings and Continuo in B flat major, RV370, begins with imitative arpeggio figures as the strings enter in turn; this is a reworking of the opening of the overture to Vivaldi's first opera, *Ottone in villa*, RV729, which dates from 1713. In the concerto's finale Vivaldi indicates the opportunity for an optional cadenza with the direction 'Qui si ferma à [*sic*] piacimento'. Chandler's 'improvisation' is thoroughly convincing, drawing on Vivaldi's approach in other surviving cadenzas. The three operatic arias on this disc are from Vivaldi's *La costanza trionfante degl'amori e de gl'odii*, RV706 (1716), from which only a few individual arias survive. One of those recorded here comes from a manuscript discovered a few years ago in Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, England, while two others rely on sources that have survived in Berlin. They are attractive pieces and excellent examples of Vivaldi's more lightweight early style of vocal writing, while the arias 'Dolce fiamma' and 'Alma oppressa' from *La fida ninfa*, RV714 (commissioned for the opening of Verona's Teatro Filarmonico in 1732), show how Vivaldi's writing had changed in the intervening years. 'Alma oppressa' is an emotional tour de force as the singer rails against her misfortunes with furious semiquavers and wide leaps. This is music that also appears (in a shorter version for tenor solo) in the recently discovered setting of the psalm *Dixit Dominus* RV807. (It would have been helpful if the notes had included some information about the dramatic contexts of these arias; and I should point out here that although *La fida ninfa* contains an unusual number of ensembles, including a trio and a quartet, there is no quintet, as claimed.)

A three-movement work in E minor for strings and continuo, RV134, might have originally been used to introduce an opera or an oratorio, as its title was changed at some point from 'Concerto' to 'Sinfonia'. However, the unusual fugal style of its first movement (far from the usual 'call to attention' that opens the surviving operatic sinfonias) and the more extensive multi-sectional finale make this scenario unlikely. The remaining work on this disc, the Concerto in C major RV561, is an ensemble concerto for violin, two violoncellos, strings and continuo. Together with the two Vivaldi works on the final volume in the set, it is an excellent example of Vivaldi's *concerti con molti stromenti*. The Concerto in F major RV569, for violin, two oboes, bassoon, two horns, strings and continuo – which opens the final disc of the trilogy, *The Golden Age* – was written in the late 1710s and contains, along with the customary roving spotlight highlighting different instrumental groups in turn, an extraordinary moment in the finale when all the instruments hold a long F pedal note under semiquaver passages for a series of solo instruments. The concluding Concerto in D major



RV562a is scored for the same ensemble with the addition of timpani – the only Vivaldi concerto to use drums, although parts for them also appear in a few operatic pieces.

The other works on this final disc show Vivaldi's influence on other north Italian composers. Giuseppe Tartini and Pietro Locatelli were also virtuoso violinists; Tartini's four-movement Concerto in B flat major D117, dating from around 1730, is one of his earliest surviving violin concertos and contains examples of both a shorter cadenza and a longer, virtuosic capriccio based on previous motivic material. Between 1717 and 1723 Locatelli was frequently employed in Rome by Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, who also acted as patron to Vivaldi during his spells in Rome in 1723 and 1724. Locatelli's Op. 4 concertos, published in Amsterdam in 1725, comprise six *introduzioni teatrali* followed by six concertos; the attractive concerto No. 11 looks back to Corelli with its solo parts scored for two violins and cello, alongside the antiquated practice of writing two separate viola parts, while No. 12 follows the Vivaldian three-movement structure and is scored for four solo violins. The final composer represented here, Giovanni Battista Sammartini, also has a link to Vivaldi in the sense that he was oboist at the Teatro Regio Ducale in Milan when Vivaldi's opera *La Silvia*, RV734, was performed there in 1721. One of his ensemble concertos, the Concerto in E flat major J-C73, follows the model of Vivaldi's works in this genre, with its pairs of violins, oboes, horns and trumpets, but its style reflects its later date of the early 1750s, with a more classical musical language in its two long movements.

The performances on all three discs are of a consistently high standard. The playing of *La Serenissima* is crisp and focused, full of bounce and energy, and the recordings from Avie are clean and nicely balanced. Dynamics are well contrasted but not excessively so, with none of the over-the-top mannerisms of some younger continental groups. The range of instruments offers a broad palette of tonal colours, nicely enhanced by the plucked continuo of Eligio Quinteiro, who provides rhythmic impetus in the allegros and touches of colour in the slow movements without ever becoming obtrusive. There are also some particularly nicely judged textures in the slow movements. Adrian Chandler's solo playing is at times breathtaking: he meets all the virtuoso demands head on but is always fully in control. He is exciting in passages of rapid string crossing or flying semiquavers in the highest positions, yet gently lyrical, with a sweetness and warmth of tone, in the slow movements, such as that of RV569. *La Serenissima* contains no weak links, from the crisp horn fanfares in the same concerto to the eloquent oboe playing of Gail Hennessy in the Sammartini concerto, where she proves an excellent foil to Chandler in their duet passages. In the vocal works, Mhairi Lawson's clear soprano has similar qualities: she displays seemingly effortless command in the most demanding coloratura passages and is full of character in the arias from *La costanza trionfante*. Both she and Chandler make their ornamentation sound perfectly natural; this is especially true of some of the concerto slow movements, where he invariably catches the right mood.

The seriousness with which this project has been approached is exemplified by the fact that in order to play at the higher pitch generally found in northern Italy during the first half of the eighteenth century, oboes and a bassoon modelled on Milanese originals were specially constructed for *La Serenissima*. The discs are generously filled (with almost eighty minutes of music on each) and the excellent accompanying notes are full of information that helps guide the listener through the development of the concerto at this crucial period. Overall, these discs are a splendid example of how a complex project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council can relate to a general audience.

ERIC CROSS

