

Mozart is mourned in his pauper's grave in Vienna, but let's not forget that the master of Italian baroque suffered the same fate

Antonio Vivaldi's Bones

by Duncan J. D. Smith

One of the most recognisable pieces of classical music is the first concerto of Antonio Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* (*Le quattro stagioni*) for solo violin and orchestra, evoking the unfettered joys of spring. Popular and influential during his lifetime, Vivaldi ranks today among the most widely recorded of Baroque composers. It therefore seems strange that few people know he was buried in Vienna. Beethoven, Mozart, and Schubert, of course. But Vivaldi?

The Red Priest

Antonio Lucio Vivaldi was born in Venice on 4th March 1678. He was baptized immediately either because of ill health or the fact that Venice was shaken by an earthquake on the same day. Little Antonio inherited two distinctive traits from his father, a talent for playing the violin – and red hair! Indeed, after being ordained in 1703, Vivaldi was referred to affectionately as *il Prete Rosso* or the Red Priest.

In his mid-twenties Vivaldi became *maestro di violino* in the *Ospedale della Pietà*, an orphanage in which boys learned a trade and girls were given a musical education. The most talented girls stayed on and became members of the renowned *Ospedale* orchestra and choir. Whilst playing the violin Vivaldi was often accompanied by the angelic voices of the orphan girls, and over the next thirty years he would compose many of his instrumental concertos and sacred choral works in this way.

Vivaldi's reputation as an international composer came in 1711, with the publication of his *L'Estro Armonico*, usually translated "Harmonic Inspiration." An instant success across Europe, these concertos have been hailed as the most significant instrumentals from the eighteenth century.

Baroque Superstar

Alongside the success of his concertos, Vivaldi increasingly devoted his time to opera, the most popular entertainment in eighteenth century Venice, of which he ultimately penned around fifty. In 1718 he worked as *Maestro di Capella* in Mantua, where the surrounding countryside inspired the writing of his *Four Seasons*. He then toured Italy and accepted a personal invitation from Pope Benedict XIII to play in Rome. By the time Vivaldi returned to Venice in 1725 he had become a Baroque superstar.

It was during his time in Mantua that Vivaldi became acquainted with an aspiring young soprano called Anna Giro, who joined his entourage and accompanied him on his tours. Inevitably rumors of a relationship surfaced, but Vivaldi vehemently denied any wrongdoing.

Vienna Calling

Some have claimed that the rumors made life difficult for Vivaldi in his native Venice, forcing him to flee to Vienna in 1740. It seems more likely that he relocated to seek imperial patronage at the court of Emperor Charles VI. However, although Vivaldi had indeed been

honored by the emperor during a visit to Trieste in 1728, there is no firm evidence that he contacted the monarch on arrival here.

Vivaldi occupied an apartment owned by the widow of a saddlemaker in a four-storey house above the Kärntnertor, one of eight gateways that pierced the Renaissance city wall. Now long demolished, the house stood on Philharmoniker Strasse, where the Hotel Sacher now stands. Also gone is the Kärntnertor Theatre that stood nearby. Vivaldi may have chosen this area so as to be near a theatre that could stage his operas.

A Modest End

Times were changing though and the popularity of Vivaldi's work began to wane. Like other composers of his day he had no reliable income and was forced to sell his manuscripts at paltry prices. Worse was to come. The emperor died shortly after Vivaldi's arrival in Vienna dashing any hopes of currying royal favor. Not long afterwards on Jul. 28, 1741 Vivaldi himself died, a pauper in a rented apartment. The diagnosis was "internal fire", probably the asthmatic bronchitis from which he suffered all his life.

Vivaldi's funeral service was held in St. Stephen's Cathedral and was attended by six choristers, one of whom was the nine-year old Josef Haydn and included a *Kleingeläut*, or pauper's peal of bells. Vivaldi's remains were then placed in a simple grave in the *Armen-sünder-Gottesacker*, a cemetery for poor sinners located near the Baroque Karlskirche, outside the Kärntnertor gate, as all cemeteries inside the city wall had been closed on health grounds in 1530.



An engraving of the world-renowned musician, Antonio Vivaldi, said to be in the process of composing
Courtesy of the Albertina

In 1789 this cemetery too was abandoned, by order of Emperor Joseph II, who decreed that new cemeteries be opened *outside* the Linienwall (today's Gürtel). Vivaldi's remains were never retrieved or relocated. Later still, between 1815 and 1818, Vienna's Technical University (*Technisches Universität*) was built on the former site of the cemetery, where today a simple stone marks the spot. Erected to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Vivaldi's birth, it is there to let us know that the great composer still lies buried somewhere far below.

Duncan J. D. Smith is the author of *Only in Vienna* (Christian Brandstätter Verlag) www.duncanjdsmith.com