

# Tafelmusik

## ANTONIO VIVALDI

### TEACHER AND STUDENT MATERIALS

This guide was created by Alison Mackay to accompany Tafelmusik's music education initiatives.

The CD referred to in this guide is:

Vivaldi: *Eleven Concertos*, Anner Bylsma, cello (CD# SK 62719)  
Sony Classical: Vivarte 1997

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**Antonio Vivaldi** was born in Venice, the beautiful Italian city of canals, gondolas and carnivals. On March 4, 1678, the day of his birth an earthquake shook the city. The baby was not expected to live because of a lung ailment but he survived for 63 years to become one of the most influential musicians of all time.

Venice, at the time of Vivaldi's birth, was the pleasure capital of Europe, offering an annual carnival that lasted for three months, seven full-time opera houses where the performances began at eleven at night and lasted until three in the morning, and a dizzying choice of shops, casinos, coffee houses and public masked balls.

At the age of 25, Vivaldi was ordained as a priest. He had bright red hair and came to be known as the "red priest". He spent little time in church activities, however, instead devoting his life to playing the violin, teaching, and composing instrumental pieces, operas and sacred music.

### *Vivaldi as a performer*

The son of a professional violinist, Vivaldi developed a dazzling technique that far surpassed the expectations of his time. His audiences were surprised and excited by his virtuosic improvisations played in very high positions. A visitor named Uffenbach reported "his playing terrified me for such has not been nor can ever be played; he came within a grass-stalk's breath of the bridge with his left hand so that the bow had no room - and this on all four strings at incredible speed!" Vivaldi had to begin composing in order to accommodate his own expanding abilities as a soloist.

### *Vivaldi as a teacher*

Violinists came from all over Europe to hear Vivaldi play and to take lessons from him. He was associated for most of his career with a famous music school at the "Ospedale della Pietà", a residence for orphaned and abandoned girls, many of whom were trained as singers and instrumentalists. The school had a famous orchestra made up of the most talented girls whose playing was a huge attraction for music lovers from Venice and from abroad. Most of Vivaldi's concertos were composed for this group which performed from a balcony, hidden from the audience by a lattice of ironwork.

## *Vivaldi as a composer*

In addition to 40 operas and works for church services Vivaldi composed more than 500 instrumental concertos. About 350 were for solo instrument and orchestra. Three of these works may be heard on the accompanying Tafelmusik C.D. (#2, 4 and 8). About 70 concertos were for 2, 3 and 4 soloists and orchestra, such as those found in his opus 3 *L'Estro Armonico*, a famous volume which was probably the most important music publication of the first half of the 18th century and which had an enormous influence on the compositions of J.S. Bach. A further group of about 60 works are orchestral concertos in which all of the players participate equally. The G minor concerto for strings RV 157 is a piece of this type and may also be heard on the C.D. (#1.)

In these works Vivaldi developed the concerto form as we know it today with its three movements (fast-slow-fast). Virtuoso solo passages alternate with orchestral refrains or “ritornellos”. The orchestral ritornello of the solo concertos almost always appears in its entirety at the beginning and end of the movement in the home key. The middle orchestral passages usually develop shortened fragments of the same material, travelling to related keys then giving the stage over to the soloist.

Vivaldi's concertos are some of the earliest works to paint pictures and describe phenomena of nature in music. The concertos of the *Four Seasons*, his most famous work, are full of fanciful depictions of storms, barking dogs, babbling brooks and hunting expeditions. The dramatic way in which Vivaldi used the violin and the entire orchestra to transport the audience to an imaginary world excited music lovers of his own time and still makes him one of today's most beloved composers.

### *How has Vivaldi's music come down to us?*

Vivaldi was virtually forgotten between his death and beginning of the twentieth century. When an interest was revived around 1910 European libraries were found to contain a few works, such as *L'Estro Armonico* which had been published many times in Vivaldi's lifetime.

However, many of the works existed only in handwritten manuscript single copies and were thought to be lost. Then, in 1926, an impoverished monastery in northern Italy had to sell off its music collection and in it were found 14 thick books bound in pigskin which contained hundreds of unknown compositions by Vivaldi. The orchestral concertos RV 151 and 157 are from this collection.

*What will the audience hear at the Tafelmusik concert?*

The program will feature instruments of the type that Vivaldi would have played. The orchestra will play two ensemble string concertos (RV 157 and 151, C.D. #1 and 11) with baroque violins, violas, cellos, bass, and accompanying harpsichord.

We will also perform movements from Concerto in D minor for bassoon and orchestra, Concerto in C major for oboe and two violins and Concerto for four violins in E minor, op. 3 #4.

We'll demonstrate our instruments so that you'll have a chance to hear them individually. For more details and illustrations have a look in the teacher's guide.

The accompanying CD will introduce you to the sound of baroque instruments. While it does not include all of the repertoire on the concert, it will show you what an orchestra would have sounded like in Vivaldi's lifetime.