

F.A.M.E. October 2007
Antonio Vivaldi
1678 – 1741

His music

(Concerto in D, RV93) Begin playing track 1 (Antonio Vivaldi *The Complete Works for the Italian Lute of His Period*) Vivaldi's music reminds us of Vermeer's painting technique in that Vivaldi liked to feature one instrument (similar to a lighted prominent figure in a painting) while background music was played by other instruments (similar to areas in the shadow of a painting).

The title of this music is Concerto in D, RV93, not a very catchy title. During Vivaldi's lifetime, he wrote many concertos. A concerto is a piece of music in which a solo instrument plays with other instruments. A concerto has three movements of varying tempo: allegro (brisk, lively), largo (slow, stately) andante (moderately slow). D is the key the music is played in and RV93 refers to a man named Peter Ryom who has catalogued all of Vivaldi's work. R stands for Ryom, V stands for Vivaldi and the concerto is number 93. The work was written to highlight a lute and two violins.

A lute is an instrument originated in the 1400's. (*picture of lute on cart*). The body of the lute is pear shaped with a flat front and a rounded back. It has a pegbox attached at a sharp angle to the neck of the lute and typically has 11 strings. It is strummed or plucked, like a guitar. The violin was developed in the early 1500's in Italy. It has four strings that can be plucked or played with a bow. The violin has the highest pitch.

(*Play track one again*). Let's listen to the first movement of Concerto in D, RV 93. What is the solo instrument? (*lute*). Is the movement allegro, largo or andante? (*allegro*). What other instrument do you hear? (*two violins in addition to the background orchestra*).

(*Play track two*) Is the second movement allegro, largo or andante? (Largo). The lute is also the solo instrument in this movement.

(Spring – The Four Seasons)

Vivaldi is best known for his work, *The Four Seasons*. This is one of the earliest examples of program music – music intended to create an image in the mind of the listener by musically representing a scene, image or mood. *The Four Seasons* is a group of four concertos (originally part of a group of 12) for strings and a solo violin. Vivaldi supposedly wrote the four poems in sonnet form (a lyric poem of 14 lines), which present the story of each concerto.

Listen to Track 1 (tracks 2-3 are the second two movements) Vivaldi The Four Seasons -or if you can, watch the DVD of Spring. Ask the students to raise their hands when they hear the birds singing or the thunderstorm in the first movement.
Loosely translated, here is the sonnet.

Spring

(Allegro)

Joyful Spring has arrived,
The birds welcome it with their happy songs,
And the brooks in the gentle breezes
Flow with a sweet murmur.

The sky is cloaked in black
And thunder and lightning announce themselves;
When they are silenced, the little birds
Return to fill the air with their sweet song.

(Largo)

Then on the pleasant flower-strewn meadow,
To the gentle rustle of the leaves and branches,
The goatherd rests, his faithful dog at his side.

(Allegro)

To the rustic bagpipe's festive sound,
Nymphs and shepherds dance beneath
The fair spring sky in all its glory.

(I have the four sonnets on the cart if you want to read his sonnets for the other three seasons).

Biography

Antonio Vivaldi was born March 4, 1678 in Venice. Antonio was so sickly when born; the mid-wife baptized him immediately (although he may have been baptized as a result of an earthquake that shook the city that day). Vivaldi wrote describing his ailment as tightness in the chest, which historians believe was asthma. His father was an accomplished musician and played the violin during religious services at the Chapel of St. Mark's in Venice, taught Antonio the violin. Antonio was an exceptional violinist and people would come from all over Europe to hear him play and to take lessons from him.

As the eldest son in a relatively poor family, Antonio was expected to enter the priesthood. He studied for the priesthood in addition to continuing his musical studies. At the age of 25, he was ordained a priest. Due to his health (there are some reports that indicate it wasn't due to his health, but his focus on musical studies), he was relieved from saying mass and other priestly duties the following year, but remained a priest for the rest of his life. Vivaldi became known as *Il Prete Rosso* ("The Red Priest") as the result of his profession and his bright curly red hair.

In 1703 Vivaldi was hired as a violin teacher by the Conservatory of the Pieta, a religious school for orphaned and abandoned girls in Venice. The girls were trained as singers and instrumentalists. The most talented girls stayed on at the Conservatory becoming members of the orchestra and choir. The concerts at the school attracted huge audiences and were the highlight of the musical season in Venice. During the concerts, the girls were not visible as they played their instruments or sang behind an iron gate. Vivaldi continued to work at the school for over 37 years, teaching the girls to play musical instruments, directing the orchestra as well as

writing music for the girls to perform. It was an ideal situation for a composer; he had the instruments, people to copy the music he composed, a fine orchestra, a chorus to perform his work and money from the church to pay for it all. In addition, his employment with the school provided Vivaldi with ample time to compose and perform. His contract with the school in later years required only that Vivaldi write two concertos a month, he did not have to be present at the school. During this time, Vivaldi traveled and performed throughout Europe, staging and producing many operas.

Vivaldi was extremely popular and famous during much of his lifetime, however his music lost favor with the public. Towards the end of his life, Vivaldi lived in poverty, selling off his manuscripts for small sums. When he was 62, he traveled to Vienna in hopes of finding employment with Charles VI, who had admired Vivaldi's work. Unfortunately, Charles VI died that fall and the new monarchs had no interest in Vivaldi's services. On July 28, 1741, Antonio died of an "internal inflammation" and was buried in a pauper's grave in Vienna.

For the next 200 years, Vivaldi was virtually forgotten as a composer. Although he was a prolific composer, with 90 sonatas, 15 sinfonias, 500 concertos, and 92 operas, most of his works were believed to have been lost. In 1926, a monastery in Italy had to sell off its music collection to finance a renovation and 14 thick books containing hundreds of Vivaldi's compositions were discovered. That discovery led to additional manuscripts. In the mid 1940's orchestras began to record Vivaldi's works, leading to a revival in his popularity.