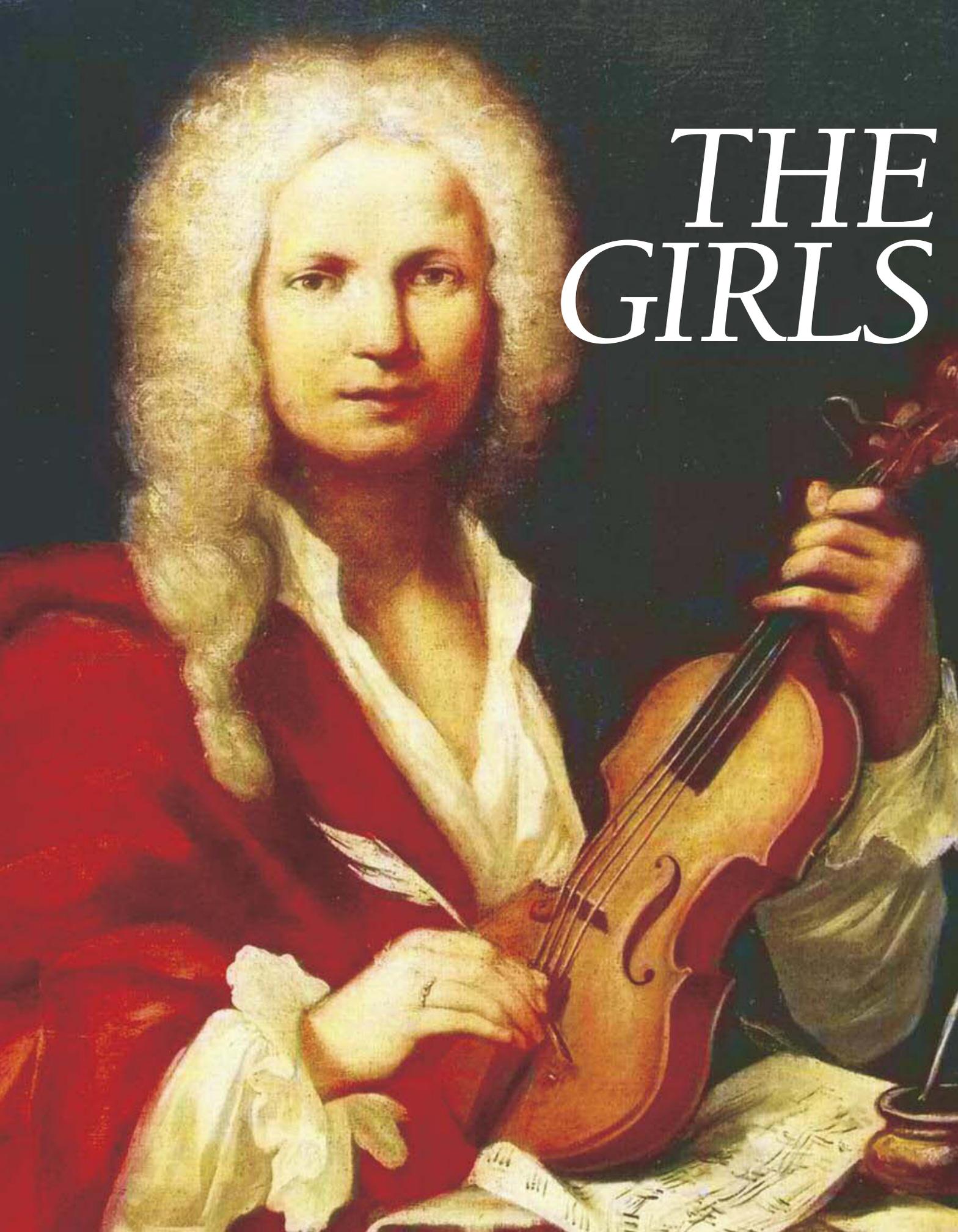


THE GIRLS



Who Played with Fire

NO INVESTIGATION into the life, work, and performing tradition of Antonio Vivaldi would be complete without considering the story of the extraordinary creative partnership between the great composer and the Venetian institution called the Ospedale della Pietà, a home for abandoned children where, for most of the early 18th century, Vivaldi was a violin teacher, musical director, and in-house composer. The institution had its own all-female orchestra and choir who provided sacred “entertainment” in the church for visiting tourists. The unique relationship that Vivaldi formed with these young women was crucial to Vivaldi’s prodigious output of both instrumental music and some of the finest and most profound choral music written during the height of the Italian Baroque.

Two recent recordings by Matthias Maute and his Montreal-based Ensemble Caprice have explored these textures, paying homage to Vivaldi’s work with the girls of the Ospedale. *Gloria! Vivaldi’s Angels* (2008) and *Vivaldi: The Return of the Angels* (2011) use the all-female vocal forces originally heard in works such as the famous *Gloria*, RV589 and the oratorio, *Juditha triumphans*, RV 644.

Founded between 1336 and 1346, the Ospedale della Pietà was one of four institutions that, for several centuries, served the Republic of Venice’s most vul-

nerable, ill, and destitute citizens. A very progressive model of social welfare for its time, the Ospedale only required illegitimacy for admission to one of Europe’s finest conservatory programs.

One of the features of the building itself was a revolving door built into the outer wall, known as a *scaffetta*, where the unwanted children of Venice could be anonymously deposited, to be collected by a prioress on the other side. The quality of education the orphans received was very high for the era, causing the state to issue an edict threatening

excommunication to any family who left their legitimate offspring at the Ospedale, in hopes that they would get a better education there than what their own families could afford.

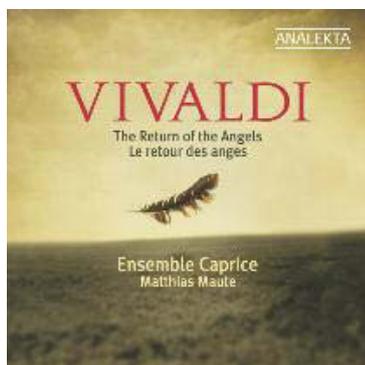
At ten, boys were sent away to be apprenticed in trades, while girls remained to be further

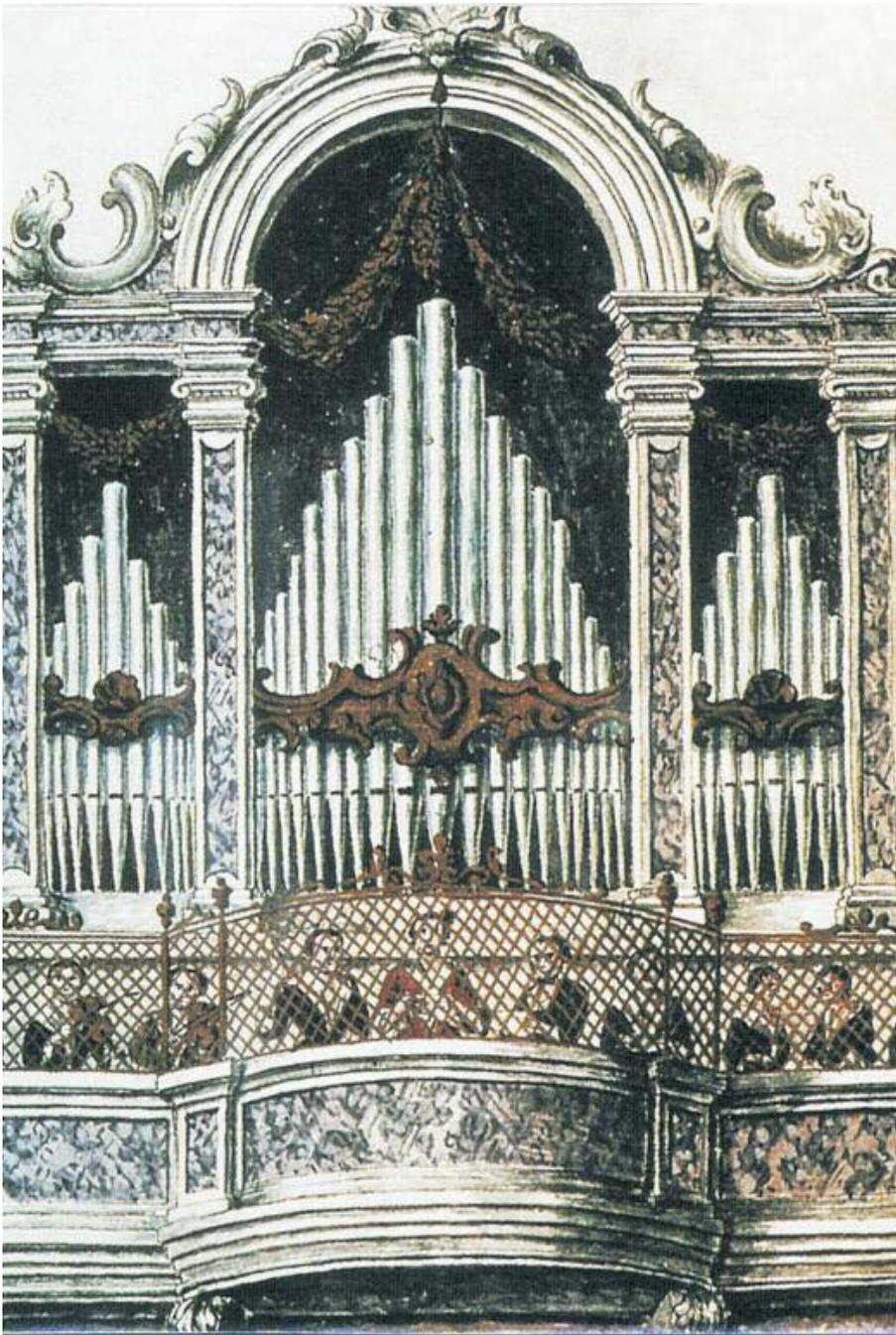
educated in a field that would allow them to be employable as adults. At the Ospedale della Pietà, a small percentage of girls who demonstrated talent were handpicked for musical training. They became known as *figlie di coro* (literally, “daughters of the choir”), though they were trained as instrumentalists as well as singers. These young women became a sensation, attracting tourists from all over Europe, who were eager to hear the exotic and angelic sounds they produced.

Discussing the research and preparation that went into Ensemble Caprice’s

Ensemble Caprice has made two recordings exploring the music that Antonio Vivaldi wrote for his highly trained all-girl orchestra and chorus at the Ospedale della Pietà

By Pemi Paull





The organ loft at the Ospedale della Pietà, where the musicians performed behind a screen.

recordings of Vivaldi's sacred choral works, Maute noted that Vivaldi was well aware of how unusual his role was as music director at the Ospedale.

"Vivaldi was inspired by the very particular ambiance of the Ospedale," Maute says. "We felt that this needed to be re-created, because it would be just as effective today as then. There must have been an energy created by the situation in which Vivaldi wrote his music, and it inspired and informed the work. It is still a singular effect today."

Vivaldi was ordained a priest in 1703. Within a year of being ordained, however, because of a host of physical complaints (possibly angina pectoris, asthmatic bronchitis, or a nervous disorder of some sort), he no longer felt compelled to celebrate mass. It is also possible that Vivaldi was simulating illness—there were whisperings that he sometimes left the altar in order to quickly jot down a musical idea in the sacristy! In any event, it appears that he had become a priest reluctantly, perhaps because in his day training for the priesthood was often the only possible way to obtain a free education.

Vivaldi at the Ospedale

Vivaldi's relationship with the Ospedale began right after his ordination, when he was named as violin teacher there. From then on, he was associated with the Ospedale throughout his life, except for 1710, when he was let go for a year and composed operas for the Teatro Sant'Angelo, and for a period between 1717 and 1725, when he frequented a number of European capitals (though he seems to have come back to the Ospedale on occasion).

At the end of 1717, Vivaldi moved to Mantua, taking up the post of Maestro di Cappella at the court of Landgrave Philip of Hesse-Darmstadt, moving on to Milan and Rome and eventually returning to Venice in 1725, where he staged new operas for the Teatro Sant'Angelo. While in Mantua, he had made the acquaintance of the singer Anna Giraud, and she had moved in to live with him. Vivaldi maintained that she was only a housekeeper and good friend, just like Anna's sister, Paolina, who also shared his house. Whatever their relationship,

Vivaldi stayed together with her until his death, the ambiguity of their relationship creating a faint whiff of scandal.

Although his original position at the Ospedale was as resident violin teacher, Vivaldi's duties quickly expanded, and he took over the directorship of the choir and orchestra, rehearsing, performing, and ultimately composing a large portion of his major works for the young girls in his charge, who were known to their contemporaries as the *putte* or maidens. By 1738, there were around a hundred *putte* in residence at the Ospedale. The girls were divided into two categories: the *figlie di comun*, commoners who received a general education, and the *figlie di coro*, choristers and musicians who received a thorough musical training in solfeggio, singing, and instrumental technique.

Not long after Vivaldi's appointment, the orphans' music-making began to gain an excellent reputation in Venice and beyond. Judging by their eventual celebrity status, the standard of performance must have been exceptionally high. Before long, the reputation of the Pietà surpassed anything in Europe and drew visitors from all over Europe. Even Pope Pius IV came to hear the girls play and sing.

Impressions recorded by visitors leave a glowing account. In 1720, an English traveler, Edward Wright, gives us the following report:

Every Sunday and holiday there is a performance of music in the chapels of these hospitals, vocal and instrumental, performed by the young women of the place, who are set in a gallery above and, though not professed, are hid from any distinct view of those below by a lattice of ironwork. The organ parts, as well as those of other instruments, are all performed by the young women. They have a eunuch for their master, and he composes their music. Their performance is surprisingly good, and many excellent voices are among them. And this is all the more amusing since their persons are concealed from view.

Of course, Wright was completely wrong to assume that the composer was a eunuch, but such was the imagination of a listener carried away by the celestial sounds of an invisible choir and orchestra of young girls.

While the girls were at least partially

hidden from Wright's view, they must have been seen on some occasions or from some angles; it is known that the Ospedale became a wedding agency of sorts. While the Sunday concerts did attract a musically sophisticated audience, some men came looking for a future wife, believing, perhaps, that the girls represented some kind of angelic female ideal.

According to the British politician William Beckford:

The sight of the orchestra still makes me smile. You know, I suppose, it is entirely of the feminine gender, and that nothing is more common than to see a delicate white hand journeying across an enormous double bass, or a pair of roseate cheeks puffing, with all their efforts, at a French horn. Some that are grown old and Amazonian, who have abandoned their fiddles and their lovers, take vigorously to the kettle-drum; and one poor limping lady, who had been crossed in love, now makes an admirable figure on the bassoon.

The French jurist Charles de Brosse, having met the composer in 1739 in Venice, reported:

...about forty girls take part in every concert. I vow to you that there is nothing so diverting as the sight of a young and pretty nun in white habit, with a bunch of pomegranate blossoms over her ear, conducting the orchestra and beating time with all the grace and precision imaginable.

Maute discusses this phenomenon in his program notes for *Gloria! Vivaldi's Angels*:

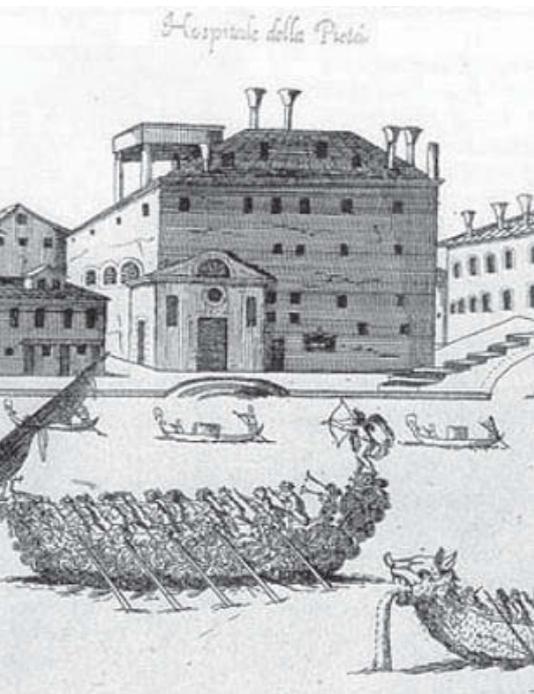
“Vivaldi must have been aware of the somewhat erotic and taboo aspect of a choir of virgin maidens performing his sacred music, and the power that must have had on the audience of the time.”

—Matthias Maute

Matthias Maute leading Ensemble Caprice in a Montreal concert of Vivaldi vocal works for women's choir.



PHOTO: BILL BLACKSTONE



A view of the Ospedale della Pietà, a refuge and music conservatory for Venetian foundlings, where Antonio Vivaldi trained a crackerjack ensemble of female instrumentalists and vocalists throughout his life.

Listening to the golden sound of the music without being able to see any of the musicians must have given the impression of being at the doors of paradise—or at least as close to paradise as one could be on earth! Occasionally, and as an exception, the strict rules of the Ospedale were relaxed and some of the young women were permitted to leave the walls of their “golden prison” (always chaperoned by a nun) if someone had requested a meeting.

The Caprice recordings

When Ensemble Caprice recorded the *Gloria! Vivaldi's Angels*, Maute began with the assumption that Vivaldi was aiming to create the strongest impact possible. “It is quite clear that these works were not originally performed by a mixed choir,” he says. “Vivaldi must have been aware of the somewhat erotic and taboo aspect of a choir of virgin maidens performing his sacred music, and the power that must have had on the audience of the time. As performers today, we try to do the same thing. We try to get that energy from the music by imaging the original performance.”

Regarding the registration of the voices, there is some controversy about whether the tenor and bass parts were sung in their proper registers, possibly by older women, or whether they were transposed up an octave. A list of musicians from 1707 at the Ospedale includes an “Anneta dal basso” and a “Paulina dal tenor.” The Schola Pietatis Antonio Vivaldi, an all-female vocal ensemble made up of members the Oxford Girls Choir, have experimented with the performance of Vivaldi’s tenor and bass parts in the lower register. It was the practice of Porpora, Pampani, and others at the neighboring Ospedaletto, however, to have bass and perhaps tenor parts transposed up an octave.

For Ensemble Caprice, the guiding principle was to aim for the heart of the matter, to create the strongest impact possible. Thus, Maute decided to use an all-female choir, in the spirit of the original performance of Vivaldi’s music, but to transpose the tenor and bass voices up an octave. The denser texture that results from the close harmony of a choir of all-female voices emphasizes the impact of Vivaldi’s dissonances, because

the intervals between the notes are tighter than those of a choir of mixed gender. The higher register also reinforces the impression of a celestial chorus of angels made up of (virgin) orphan girls.

Similarly, the way in which Maute has conceived and structured these recordings makes use of Baroque symbolism to create the maximum effect. For example, Vivaldi: *The Return of the Angels* begins with excerpts from the oratorio, *Juditha triumphans*, RV 644, and ends with the chorus, “Et in terra pax” from the *Gloria*, RV 588, going from war to peace. In between, he placed excerpts from the oratorio *Gesù al calvario*, ZWV 62, by Jan Dismas Zelenka. According to Maute:

Jan Dismas Zelenka, was obviously inspired by Vivaldi’s sacred music when he composed the heart-rending lament “Misera Madre,” in which Mary’s suffering at the foot of the cross is set for high-voice choir. It becomes quite obvious from the striking dissonances in this piece that the transition from war to peace is not always an easy one. In this way, we can re-create the story today in a way that is relevant to our contemporary situation.

It would seem that our own age has something to learn from 18th-century Italy. Providing top-notch musical training without charge to disadvantaged girls and women on the margins of society bespeaks a sense of social responsibility that would be praiseworthy today. Groups like Ensemble Caprice are shedding new light on the masterpieces Vivaldi wrote for these students and in the process allowing us to admire once again the remarkable achievement of their creation. Fittingly, the Pietà Church that stands on the site where Vivaldi’s music was first performed (it was built in 1745, four years after Vivaldi’s death) is now used exclusively for concerts, and visiting groups of musicians who wish to perform there are required to do at least one work by Vivaldi, allowing the legacy of the Pietà’s music director to flourish in Venice in perpetuity. ♣

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