

Vivaldi: Music at the Ospedale della Pietà

Strand: Western art music – Baroque instrumental music – Instrumental concerto

1. Composer background

[Accompanying PowerPoint provides illustrations]

The Ospedale della Pietà that we see in Venice today is a beautiful neo-classical church (see slides). The term Ospedale (plural ospedali) simply means hospital, but it is not an institution that we would recognise as a place of medical care. We are frequently told that the Ospedale della Pietà cared for orphans. What is less talked about are the reasons it was needed, and the type of care it provided. It was one of four large Ospedali in Venice. As institutions they were more than just places for the sick. They were places of 'hospitality' for the poor, the sick, the abandoned etc. but run by the church. Most of the occupants of the Ospedali were in some way social outcasts – those with incurable diseases such as syphilis or leprosy, those who were mentally ill, single women who could not support themselves, and so on.

The Pietà, while not strictly a convent, would have been run on the strict daily routines of a convent. (See slide 6) While its foundation in the fourteenth century was to house orphans and abandoned babies, by the seventeenth century it also provided education for those who could afford it. The girls housed in the Ospedale would have been a mix of orphans, children abandoned as babies and the daughters of the upper classes who would have been placed there by their families because they were not marriageable for any number of reasons, or who they wanted simply to get an education. A well-known account by the French philosopher and musical commentator Rousseau who visited the Pietà describes how after hearing the 'angelic' music coming from behind the grilles of the choir lofts (see slide 7) begged to be introduced to the singers, only to find that many of them were ugly, disfigured by smallpox or disabled.

In parallel to the large number of women in convents in Venice, the city was equally well-known for its large number of prostitutes and courtesans and inevitably, unwanted babies. The wheel built into the side of the Pietà enabled women to leave babies to the care of the Ospedale anonymously. (see slide 8) Such orphans were looked after and when old enough apprenticed to trades people, sent into service as servants or, if talented in music, trained up to a level at which they might earn a living or at least be able to teach younger children. Those who were talented and stayed on at the Pietà, joined a group of musicians who provided music of high quality that drew crowds who donated generously to support the ongoing work of the Ospedale. The music thus had a commercial *raison d'être* as well as fulfilling various functions within the religious rituals of the community and its church.

Rousseau's description supports other accounts about 'unattractive' daughters being placed in convents to remove them from the marriage market.

There are in Venice four of these female hospitals; this of the Incurabili, the Pietà, Ospitaletto, and the Mendicanti. Infants are receiv'd into these hospitals; into the Incurabili (originally destin'd to another use) not without a sum given with them; into the Pietà, and the other two, as I take it, without any.

Those who would choose for a wife one that has not been acquainted with the world, go to these places to look for 'em; and they generally take all the care they can, they shall be as little acquainted with the world afterwards. Those put into the Pietà are generally bastards. There are a prodigious number of children taken care of in this hospital: they say they amount sometimes to at least six thousand; and that before the erection of this charity, multitudes us'd to be found which had been thrown into the canals of the city. Every Sunday and holiday there is a performance of musick in the chapels of these hospitals, vocal and instrumental, perform'd by the young women of the place; who are set in a gallery above, and (tho' not profess'd) are hid from any distinct view of those below, by a lattice of iron-work. The organ-parts, as well as those of the other instruments, are all perform'd by the young women. They have an eunuch for their master [in this it would seem that too much was expected of the traveller's naïveté] and he composes their musick. Their performance is surprisingly good; and many excellent voices are among them: and there is somewhat still more amusing, in that their persons are conceal'd from view.⁴

(Rousseau quoted in Pincherle, 1938)

A significant number of nuns in Venetian convents were victims of social conventions of the upper classes. If a family had too many daughters, they could not afford to pay dowries for all of them to be married to suitable men. They therefore put their least attractive daughters into convents to be able to focus their dynastic attentions on the daughters most likely to attract a good match. This is known as 'forced vocation'. Arcangela Tarabotti's account 'The nun's hell' (*Inferno monacale*) provides a well-known example. Nuns put into convents in this way may have had monthly allowances from family and lived in luxuriously furnished cells. They got around the vow of poverty as the money was given to the convent and they never personally spent it.

One issue arising from forced vocations was the status of women in convents. There were the aristocratic 'choir nuns' who had taken full vows and the *converse* – lay women who had only taken one set of vows. In practice this played out as two social classes within the convent. Only the choir nuns could aspire to the higher duties which might lead to becoming an abbess. The *converse* might likewise be treated like servants. It also meant though, that convent communities would have brought together large numbers of well-educated women, and music was of importance not only to their worship but also to what leisure time they may have had.

Vivaldi was an ordained priest as well as being a virtuoso violinist and composer. He was allowed to be appointed as a music teacher in a female convent because of his status as a priest who had taken vows of chastity and obedience at ordination.

Activity 1

There are a number of issues around disability and access that could be raised in response to Rousseau's account.

1. Ask students to research the question as to whether people with disabilities today get access to high quality education and more specifically music education. They might for example look at the following websites:

<http://paraorchestra.com/>

<https://edm.com/industry/uk-study-shows-barriers-for-disabled-people-music-access>

<https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/news/youth-music-report-reshape-music/>

<https://www.friendshipcircle.org/blog/2014/01/13/5-reasons-why-music-helps-children-with-special-needs/>

Activity 2

Can students identify composers or performers who are or were disabled? If not, ask them to research the question. They might come up with artists as diverse as John Stanley and Stevie Wonder and Andrea Bocelli who were or are blind, or pianist Paul Wittgenstein who lost his right arm in the First World War but went on to commission works for the left hand; musicians who are exposed to loud music, especially in popular genres are susceptible to hearing loss – famous cases include Ozzy Osborne, but percussionist Evelyn Glennie jazz musician Mandy Harvey became profoundly deaf at a young age, and course Beethoven should not be missed.

Activity 3

Vivaldi's compositions for the women musicians of the Ospedale della Pietà may be an avenue through which to explore issues around the role of women in music. Music was a career option for women within the enclosed environment of the Ospedale both as performers and teachers but was extremely restricted outside of the Ospedale. Students will probably be able to identify female performers of today very easily and talk about their influence, but can they identify any from the period of Vivaldi? Who were the women performers and composers of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries?

Although this is a recording review, it does give some information about two of the women for whom Vivaldi wrote music. <https://www.cpr.org/2015/03/28/vivaldis-lesser-known-legacy-female-violin-virtuosos-of-18th-century-venice/>

2. Related repertory

Women composers contemporary with Vivaldi other than those associated with the Pietà include:

Anna Amalia of Prussia was well known to C.P.E. Bach and wrote music for wind instruments and wind bands – genres not normally available to women. <https://www.cpebach.de/en/about-bach/people-and-places/princess-anna-amalia>

Anna Bon, a Venetian, who studied at the Ospedale, but was not an orphan.

<https://www.allmusic.com/artist/anna-bon-di-venezia-mn0002156276/biography>

Music by both women can be found on YouTube

3. Curriculum links

History & History of medicine

See also OU resources on Vivaldi: Flute concerto 'Il cardellino'

4. Bibliography/further reading

Baldauf-Berds, J. Women musicians of Venice: Musical Foundations 1525-1855,

Laven, M. *Virgins of Venice*, Penguin, 2002

Eanes, C. 2009, "Research Report - Angels of Song: An Introduction to Musical Life at the Venetian "Ospedali"", *Choral Journal*, vol. 49, no. 8, pp. 71-81

Pincherle, M. (1938) 'Vivaldi and the Ospitali of Venice', *The Musical quarterly*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25, p. 300.