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**Antonio Vivaldi’s Influences in Music from the Baroque Period to Modern Times**

Antonio Vivaldi, a Baroque composer born in Venice in 1678, is very well known for his sonatas, operas and vocal music, but particularly for his 500 plus concertos. Among these works is possibly Vivaldi’s most renowned concerto, “The Four Seasons”. This piece is extremely expressive, especially as it is accompanied by an individual sonnet for each season, which provides the performers with a guide to interpreting the subtleties that are ever-present in Vivaldi’s works.[[1]](#footnote-1) Vivaldi is also the most representative European composer of a genre that he popularized in the 1710s, the double violin concerto, and these works are known to have influenced future composers, even including Bach.[[2]](#footnote-2) Vivaldi is also said to have either invented or at least to have popularized ritornello in his concertos, in addition to many other concepts such as small motivic units that he used as themes, and his use of rhythm to build tension as his compositions escalated.[[3]](#footnote-3) Vivaldi was a very important composer in his time and even to this day because of his numerous compositions, the new musical forms he introduced, and the many musical concepts that he popularized through his pieces. This paper will first discuss the background leading up to Vivaldi’s career and various life influences on his music, followed by the various musical forms and concepts that he used, one of the most well-known concertos that he wrote, “The Four Seasons”, and why his works were significant in his time and why they are still significant today.

Antonio Lucio Vivaldi was born into an Italian family in March of 1678 to a father who was a professional violinist. The young Vivaldi travelled frequently with his father when he was young, and it did not take long for him to follow in his father’s footsteps. Beginning in 1693, Vivaldi was trained for the priesthood. He remained in training for ten years and in the priesthood for an additional three years after this, but he soon quit, blaming his illness, which most modern physicians identify as bronchial asthma. Despite this reasoning, it is often suspected that Vivaldi left the priesthood after receiving a free education in order to pursue his dreams as a violinist and composer. Although he remained pious for the remainder of his life, this theory is strengthened by accounts of his retiring from at least one sermon to write down a fugue that had come to him at the pulpit. Regardless of his reasons for leaving, joining the priesthood was very advantageous for Vivaldi, particularly as Baroque Venice was the musical capital of Europe at the time, and thus it offered him arguably the very best education he could have found.[[4]](#footnote-4)

After his time spent in the priesthood, Vivaldi began working as a violin teacher at the Ospedale della Pietà, an orphanage in Venice, Italy. These institutions were well known for aspiring young musicians, and often concerts held by these students were popular among the Venetian nobility and foreign visitors. These performances became so prominent during the 18th century that they even began to rival performances held at the opera houses. It is highly likely that some of this fame can be attributed to Vivaldi, as after he had become established at the institution, it became known as the ospedale with the most prestigious instrumental instruction.[[5]](#footnote-5) This position was extremely important for Vivaldi’s career because in addition to teaching these young orphans, this job proffered him the opportunity to compose; the position prompted him to write hundreds of concertos, among other genres, for the young girls under his tutelage.[[6]](#footnote-6) While at this post, Vivaldi was required to provide two new concertos each month for the school orchestra concerts given each Sunday.[[7]](#footnote-7) The concerto was an especially effective musical genre for the young girls in this institution because they were short, incorporated many different techniques, and therefore was ideally suited for the young students.[[8]](#footnote-8) Because of these opportunities to continue composing, this position allowed Vivaldi to begin seeking recognition as a composer and to put all of his creative efforts into his music. Throughout his life, Vivaldi composed sonatas, concertos, operas, masses, motets, psalms, and solo works, but he was most well-known for the form he composed the most: concertos, a form which he popularized.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Several musical forms that are used widely today were popularized by Vivaldi, with the two most well-known including double violin concertos and ritornellos. During the early 1800s, Vivaldi’s first double violin concertos began to circulate, and he quickly became known as the most representative double violin concerto composer in Europe.[[10]](#footnote-10) It is even thought that Bach, who was a deep admirer of Vivaldi despite his lack of fame in this time,[[11]](#footnote-11) composed only one double violin concerto in his life, the concerto in D minor BWV 1043, that was highly influenced by Vivaldi’s works. Although Vivaldi was not the composer who had written the most double violin concertos, he certainly wrote compositions that were captivating enough to allow the genre to proliferate and gain traction in his time. [[12]](#footnote-12) The second and even more influential form that Vivaldi popularized was the ritornello. Ritornello form refers to a musical passage that is reoccurring throughout a piece of music that alternates with sections of contrasting material. Although sometimes these sections are repeated exactly, they can also be slightly varied. In some genres, such as concerto grosso, the orchestra plays the ritornello while soloists or solo groups perform the contrasting sections.[[13]](#footnote-13) Although there has been some debate over whether Vivaldi invented this form, it seems indisputable that he can be credited with its popularization. In the repetition of the ritornello, Vivaldi often repeated only the main motives employed in these sections, which became one of the musical concepts that he was most well-known for using.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In addition to popularizing musical forms, Vivaldi was known for using specific musical styles and techniques. Most prominent among these were motivic units, or themes reoccurring throughout his pieces and used in later variations, similar to the ritornello form described above, as well as rhythm, including syncopation, which Vivaldi used to build tension, lots of ornamentation, and scene painting. Vivaldi’s motivic units and reoccurring themes were extremely important to his work because they provided small structural pieces that could be used to tie together an entire piece, forming one cohesive unit. As will be discussed later, this is an extremely prominent feature of one of Vivaldi’s most well-known pieces, “The Four Seasons”. A second key musical practice that Vivaldi influenced was rhythm. He often used syncopation as a driving force in his music, and he is credited for the invention of Lombardic rhythms,[[15]](#footnote-15) which is reversed dotting, or a rhythmic pattern in which the short notes are on the beat.[[16]](#footnote-16) This was very important to his music because is kept it fast, forward moving, and upbeat. This also helped with capturing an audience’s attention and building the sense of a story, as it propels the music forward by building tension to help the compositions escalate.[[17]](#footnote-17) These rhythmic patterns combined with the often short-noted motives throughout the music make Vivaldi’s music very interesting and captivating to listen to.

Due to the immensely large number of concertos that Vivaldi composed during his life, it is these works that he is most renowned for. Vivaldi’s concertos typically followed the same general pattern, with three separate parts: a majestic opening, often relatively fast-paced, a second lyrical movement that was calmer and slower and exhibited a level of depth that was unprecedented for his time, and a the third section that like the first was very upbeat and exciting and it often provided a very rapid, playful finale.[[18]](#footnote-18) Michael Talbot, a notable music historian, described Vivaldi’s style as “featuring melodies of wide intervals based on the tonic triad chord and broken into small repeated phrases, forceful and syncopated rhythms based on folk material, and irregular, abrupt harmonic changes”.[[19]](#footnote-19) This description effectively summarizes his use of the aforementioned motives and driving forces that he used to propel his music forward. Although he had many distinct musical ideas, because he wrote more than 500 concertos, he did resort to some recycling of themes and melodic ideas between some of his compositions. Despite this, Vivaldi remains known for his captivating music, and it is apparent that his musical formula involving three sections and motives throughout his concertos has been agreeable to his audiences.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Of the 500 plus concertos that Vivaldi composed, possibly the most famous is “The Four Seasons”. This concerto is divided into four sections, one for each season. Each is distinctly different, with the starkest contrast possibly between “Spring”, which is very bright, upbeat, loud, and full of many quickly moving notes, and “Winter”, which begins extremely quietly and is much more slow, especially in the beginning. Despite these differences, there are still motives present throughout the entire piece, uniting each of the four sections. This piece is very programmatic, as it is meant to invoke certain feelings in the listeners. Vivaldi accompanied each of the sections with a short sonnet, which provided a guide of interpretation for both the performers and the audience. These sonnets are written about “bird calls in "Spring," the swarms of wasps in "Summer," the hunters' horns in "Autumn," the winds and icy snow of "Winter"”.[[21]](#footnote-21) These ideas are clear throughout each section through different motives, both rhythmic and melodic. Vivaldi bridged the gap between words and poetry and music by prefacing each movement with a sonnet and reflecting these moods with distinct musical themes and ideas. He used both literal translations of ideas to music, such as pizzicato to show raindrops and imitations of bird calls and more metaphorical translations such as dissonance to show cold present in winter and rapid scales that portray swirling winds.[[22]](#footnote-22) These techniques allowed the listeners to feel as though they were experiencing nature through Vivaldi’s musicality. It was this feeling that allowed the concerto to truly come to life straight from the strings of the violins, and perhaps this is the reason that audiences even today have fallen in love with “The Four Seasons”.

Vivaldi’s music was very significant because he taught a lot of young students who used his techniques later and popularized them, his concepts of rhythm are still used by many composers today, ritornello is still used in concertos, and his music began to bridge the gap between Baroque and Romantic music due to his extremely programmatic concertos. Without his employment at La Pietà, he most likely would not have been nearly as motivated to compose such an astounding number of concertos. In addition, his employment permitted him the opportunity to teach the young of Italy, passing on his prodigious skill and techniques to the future composers. He instilled in these young musicians a love of music and fostered their abilities to breathe life into his music. Vivaldi was well-known for linking virtuosity with an incredibly natural feel; this can be seen in “The Four Seasons”, as this concerto is full of many technically difficult sections, but at the same time the music emulates unrestrained imagination and a feeling of freedom throughout the entire piece.[[23]](#footnote-23) Vivaldi held nothing back while composing, and this invited the audience to join with him in this ability to feel everything completely in the moment, something that often only music is able to do. In this fashion, Vivaldi had an incredible influence not through his compositions alone, but also through his teaching and his ability to write music in a way that brought it to life.

Vivaldi influenced music in a more technical way as well. As previously mentioned, his rhythm was very unique, especially for his time. He used a lot of short-noted motives, which helped to bring his music to life and to make it more programmatic, as it seemed in this way as though his compositions were telling a story as the tension builds throughout the piece with a final release and a deceleration at the end. In addition to these techniques, he also incorporated syncopation and Lombardic rhythms, which he is credited with inventing. These completely changed music as it was in his day because it gave his compositions a driving force and a sense of forward motion that could not be achieved with fast notes alone. Lombardic rhythms were a monumentally important development and they are still used today.[[24]](#footnote-24) Without Vivaldi, these may have been invented much later, which would have largely impacted the history of music. In an even larger sense than rhythm, Vivaldi also impacted the history of music with his invention, or at least popularization, of the ritornello. This is a form that is still used extensively today, and without Vivaldi it may never have been so widely used.[[25]](#footnote-25)

When looking more closely at the harmonic tonality of Vivaldi’s music, it is clear that this as well influenced many composers that followed him, even in the present day. Vivaldi’s harmonic-tonal language has been described as “uniformly forward-looking and advanced”,[[26]](#footnote-26) which of course follows suit with most other aspects of his style. Vivaldi had a conception of harmonies that was very unique for his time, and it involved concepts of major-minor tonality that are still uncertain today. [[27]](#footnote-27) Vivaldi often used compound intervals, including the octave, and he fluidly transposed between minor and major keys with an ease associated only with Schubert. He was able to form a melody from sheer cadential fragments and he used these melodies as motifs that were passed back and forth between dual violinists. Vivaldi’s style was such a hit that between 1710 and 1730 composers who were older and perhaps originally thought of themselves as more advanced began to modify their style of composition to match that of Vivaldi. He was able to bring a new life to his music through the various techniques that he used and the unique harmonic tonality that his music encompassed. In general, his music flourished as he placed more importance on expressiveness and the emotion that shone through his music than on the perfection of detail.[[28]](#footnote-28) Because of this, Vivaldi had a very profound effect on the language of harmony today.[[29]](#footnote-29)

One last major influence that Vivaldi had was the incorporation of Romantic ideas into his Baroque compositions. Although he died nine years before the recognized beginning of the Romantic period, Vivaldi wrote extremely programmatic music for his time, a characteristic of Romantic music. Vivaldi’s music was extremely expressive and emotional, setting it apart from the more dogmatic composers of his time, such as Bach. Because of this, Vivaldi helped lead to the transition into the Romantic period, especially because he had such a profound influence on the other composers of his time.

Overall, Vivaldi was very important to the composers of his day all the way to music today. His music was shaped by his life history- his time in the priesthood as well as his employment at La Pietà. Vivaldi had many different compositions in numerous forms, and among his most important compositions are his concertos, of which he wrote over 500, with perhaps the most well-known piece being “The Four Seasons”. Vivaldi influenced many young musicians of his day as well as his fellow composers through his unique use of rhythm and tonality as well as the ritornello form, which became something of a trademark in his concertos. Without Vivaldi’s influences, music would not be where it is today.

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