

AUTUMN "GLORIAS"

PROGRAM NOTES

by Barbara A. Renton, Domus Musicae Slavicae

**"Autumn" (*L'Autunno*), Op. 8 No. 3, RV 293
from *The Four Seasons (Le Quattro Stagioni)*
Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)**

Il prete rosso, "the red priest" is the term by which Antonio Vivaldi was often described because of his flaming red hair (a family trait). Born in Venice, he was trained from an early age on the violin and in composition. (His father was a well-known violinist and in Vivaldi's childhood, a *Maestro di Strumenti*.) He sought advancement through the patronage channels of the time: the Roman Catholic church and the courts of the nobility. Ordained a priest, he officiated at sacraments only for a few years; his activities centered in and around the richly endowed charitable institution for orphaned, abandoned, illegitimate or indigent girls called *Ospedale della Pietà* in Venice, which functioned, in part, as a conservatory. Venice at that time was a prime tourist spot for European nobility and the acknowledged trend-setter in the arts and the Pietà was considered to be one of the best musical institutions for sacred and secular music. Vivaldi, through his astonishing virtuoso playing and through his music, soon became well-known in aristocratic circles. Through authorized and unauthorized manuscripts, and then through printed sets of instrumental concertos, Vivaldi's music became well-known to professionals and amateurs throughout the European continent and in England. The young Johann Sebastian Bach eagerly studied the early concertos and transcribed ten of them for keyboard (one with accompanying orchestra).

The Four Seasons, a set of four violin concertos of three movements each, circulated in manuscript well before appearing in a printed edition (1713 – a collection of 12 concertos, Op. 8, *Il Cimento dell'armonia e dell'iventione*, "The Contest of Harmony and Invention."). They were dedicated to Count Wenzel von Morzin of Bohemia (a cousin of another Count Morzin who would become the patron of the young Joseph Haydn). These concertos represented a truly new musical genre, whose principles were not based on the traditional contrapuntal or dance genres, and Vivaldi was the master who wrote the basic dictionary of the language – a language as appropriate for public performance as for private enjoyment.

The "invention" of each of these concertos is shown in the way Vivaldi depicts a "program" based on a sonnet, using artful "tone painting" or impressionistic allusion, all within a formal structure that is coherent in itself through the repetition and return of thematic material. Vivaldi also gave additional indications to the performers. The first movement is headed "Villagers' dance and song;" eventually the solo violin begins a new section, "the drunkard," soon joined by the other instruments representing "drunkards." All weave their tipsy way to the penultimate section, in which a sudden change of tempo heralds "the dozing drunkard;" the closing repeats the opening bars. In the short second movement the muted strings depict the "dozing drunkards." The final movement is "The hunt," complete with prancing horses and hunting horns; then "the wild beast flees," until "the beast, fleeing, dies." The return of the opening, prancing theme ends the piece. A translation of the sonnet on which each movement is based is below:

1. The peasant celebrates the blissful pleasure/ Of a happy harvest with dances and songs,/ And, glowing with the liquor of Bacchus,/ Many complete their enjoyment with sleep.
2. The air, tempered by pleasure, makes/ Everyone give up dances and songs./ It is the season that invites so many/ To the great enjoyment of a sweet sleep.
3. At dawn the hunters are off to the hunt/ With horns, rifles, and dogs./ The wild beast flees, and they follow its trail.
Frightened already, and fatigued by the noise/ Of rifles and dogs, wounded, it threatens/
Languidly to flee, but, overcome, it dies.

Gloria, RV589

Antonio Vivaldi

This *Gloria* (at least two exist in manuscript) is a liturgical work that was written to be performed by the women of the *Ospedale della Pietà* when Vivaldi was serving as *maestro di violino* and as interim *maestro di coro* (about 1716). The *Gloria* was intended to be performed for a festive Mass – a unique Venetian type known as a *Missa lecta*, a Mass read silently by the priest. It is likely that it was preceded by a motet. The Vivaldi scholar, Michael Talbot, noting the military character of some of the music, has conjectured that the *Gloria* was intended to celebrate the Venetian defeat of the Turks at Petrovaradin and the collapse of the Turkish siege of Corfu in August 1716.

In the original performance, all the parts would have been sung by the women of the *Pietà*, even the bass parts, which lie for the most part in the higher register (or in several places would have been transposed up an octave); the solo soprano and contralto parts would have been sung by choristers, temporarily stepping out of the chorus and then rejoining. The women also played the instruments. As much as the music delighted the Venetians and the aristocratic tourists, any curiosity about these talented damsels was thwarted by the fact that they led a cloistered life and performed behind partial screens.

The Latin text is the second item of the Ordinary of the Mass dating back at least to early Gregorian chant. Vivaldi divided the text into 11 separate movements, each with a different musical character and varied vocal-instrumental styles and settings. The opening bars may sound simple to our ears, but to Vivaldi's contemporaries, this melodic-rhythmic line was path-breaking and exciting. There is a return of the opening in the 10th movement that, after so much other music, appears like a welcomed friend. Some things to note: the substantial part played by the orchestra so that it is not merely an accompaniment to or "filler" for the vocal parts; the contrasted simultaneous melodies and particularly the contrasted vocal and instrumental rhythms that keep the ear engaged and the esthetic sense involved; the deliberate separation and musical highlighting of the words "et in terra pax..." ("and peace on earth..."); the pairing of an oboe and trumpet rather than two trumpets providing not only brilliance but iridescence, and the daring use of expressive harmonies.

This is one of Vivaldi's best known compositions, second only to *The Four Seasons* in popularity, and is one of the most frequently performed choral compositions of the Baroque era.

Poème de l'Amour et de la Mer, Op. 19

Ernest Chausson (1855-1899)

“Don’t think that I have fallen into writing so-called simple music. No, that is finished for good. It is not in that direction that we must look. The only thing which is truly ours and which our terrible ancestors have been unable to take away from us is our manner of understanding and feeling. That can always vary with each man. Let us then put as much as possible of ourselves into our works. That is what I am endeavoring to do.” So wrote Ernest Chausson in 1889 to his friend, Paul Poujaud, an ardent music lover. Chausson, like all of his French contemporaries, was both under the spell of Richard Wagner’s compositional style (harmony, orchestration, leitmotif technique), and simultaneously trying to break free of it.

Born into a wealthy, cultured family, Chausson did not formally begin compositional studies until he completed his law degree. He then was admitted to the *Conservatoire* which was under the directorship of César Franck, who was himself captured by “Wagnerism” and favored cyclical forms; most of Chausson’s studies were under Jules Massenet. From the first, Chausson struggled in composing – unsure of himself, with a horror of appearing amateurish, he continually wrote and rewrote – concentrating for the most part on setting texts, almost all of which express elegiac sentiments. Out of his struggles emerged a unique voice and approach – a style characterized by elegant harmonies constructed with a feel for simplicity and clarity plus a well-defined melodic line. Rather than expressing sentiment or a musical translation of the poem, he sought the impression of emotional states and ideas.

Chausson’s mansion in Paris was a salon for the leading composers, poets, writers, artists and performers of the time, all of whom had high respect for both the man and his work. In his funeral procession (his premature death was due to a bicycle accident) were composers Duparc, Fauré, Dukas, Debussy, Albéniz, Koechlin; painters Degas and Redon; sculptors Rodin and Charpentier; musicians Pierre Lalo and Eugène Ysaÿe, among others who all had enjoyed his friendship, encouragement and appreciation.

Chausson began work on the *Poème* in 1882, the year in which he attended the first performance of Wagner’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth and was transfixed by it. He chose two fairly long poems by his friend, Maurice Bouchor, *La Fleur des Eaux* and *La Mort de l’Amour*, setting them for voice and orchestra with a brief interlude between. Work on the composition continued intermittently through 1890, with a final revision in June 1893. The first performance with orchestra was in 1893 at the Société Nationale.

Each of the poems forms one long movement, divided into three sections, according to the sense of the text; thus *La Fleur* is divided into 13, 8 and 20 lines; *La Mort* into 9, 14 and 16 lines. This last section, beginning “*Les temps des lilas*,” with its haunting theme, was published later as a separate work. In each poem the textual and musical “landscape” begins in Nature with external observation and reflections, then moves to an interior, emotional “landscape,” with personal reflections and questions.

Two themes permeate and unite the work as a whole: the first being heard at the opening, in the orchestra and then by the voice; the second is heard most clearly for the first time as the voice sings the line “*Brise qui vas chanter dans les lilas...*” It will fully “flower” in the final section with the words, “*Les temps des lilas...*” The fluttering figures in the orchestral accompaniment are similar to some used by Debussy, but were common to the time and used by many composers. Overall, the orchestra is more than an accompaniment to the voice part, which at times is declamatory, and often is rather high, sounding clearly over the instruments. The lengthy orchestral passages pick up the mood of the previous text and subtly transition to the mood of the next line.

Delicacy of line and harmonic shading contribute iridescent color and momentum to this miniature – but not lesser - dramatic work.

Gloria

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963)

Francis Poulenc was part of the artistically exciting ferment in Paris following World War I, where there was continuous close support and collaboration among musicians, poets, painters and dancers. In the early 20's Poulenc was one of "Les Six," the group of French composers who set the pace for the others in daring and inventiveness. Largely self-taught (he was refused admission to the *Conservatoire*), Poulenc found his inspiration in the music of the concert hall and the Parisian music hall; "a vulgarian with a connoisseur's sense of the exquisite," as Laurence Davies has described him. He enjoyed jazz, and, being an excellent pianist, he sat in on some jazz sessions, but he did not care to employ the idiom in his compositions. Independently wealthy, Poulenc did not depend on his composing for a living, nevertheless he produced a wealth of lively, engaging music, including operas (all of which continue to be performed), a melodrama (based on the children's books, "Babar, the Elephant"), ballets, incidental music, film scores, chamber and instrumental music, and works for orchestra.

Even with all that, Poulenc composed a prodigious amount of vocal music, both solo and choral. His first choral work was for the Harvard Glee Club (*Chanson à boire/ Drinking Song*, 1922). He wrote no more choral music until 1936, when, as a lapsed Roman Catholic, he experienced a religious reawakening after a pilgrimage to the shrine of the black virgin at Rocamadour, France. From then on, with a few exceptions, all his choral music centered on church texts. *Gloria* was commissioned by the Koussevitsky Music Foundation and was dedicated by the composer to the memory of conductor, Serge Koussevitsky and his wife Natalie. The first performance, with the composer present (his last trip to the U.S.), was with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Charles Munch, in January, 1961; the soprano solo, originally created for Leontyne Price, was sung by Adele Addison, due to Price's unavailability at that time. The work was greeted with great critical acclaim. In 1962 Poulenc wrote to a friend, "I have to my credit, I hope, [some] religious works (including *Gloria*). May they spare me a few days of purgatory if, with a bit of luck, I manage to avoid hell."

Composed for mixed chorus, soprano soloist and orchestra, the texts of *Gloria* are the same as used by Vivaldi, but divided differently into 6 movements, and with the words juxtaposed almost in free association at times; no attempt was made to conform to the liturgical use. Because of the persistent occurrence of accents on the "wrong" syllable, there has been speculation as to whether there had originally been a different text, particularly as the traditional theological/ liturgical meaning of the words is not reflected in the music itself. Rather, the composer seems to be describing to us a series of visual images of ways in which heaven intersects with earth. Speculation aside, the piece, with its brilliant transparency, rhythmic energy, and shifting harmonic colors, creates its own reason for being, rewarding even a casual listener, who will note Poulenc's tendency toward binary thought and organization. Every motive or phrase is immediately repeated or echoed; it will also be noted that a motive is wedded to specific words, always returning together, much as in Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." It is almost guaranteed that one or more of Poulenc's melodies will remain with you long after you have left the concert hall.