Research Report

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Angels of Song: An Introduction to Musical Life at the Venetian *Ospedali*

by

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As hard as it is to believe, only seventy-five years ago, the works of Vivaldi were lying neglected in a few archives around the world, having seen only a handful of performances in centuries. In the intervening years, however, his music has captivated audiences with its elegant vitality, tunefulness, and its accessibility to both the professional and the amateur musician. And though Vivaldi has become the most recorded classical composer in history, many don't know that he wrote a sizeable number of his works not for professional musicians, but for schoolgirls at one of the four orphanages, or *ospedali,* in his hometown of Venice. Since the revival of his works began, much has been made of the institution which begat some of his finest and most oft-performed music, the Ospedale della Pietà.

The image that has developed of the Pietà and the three other *ospedali* in Venice is a romantic picture: young, beautiful orphan girls made good, playing and singing as cloistered cherubim, performing behind screens to hide their beauty from the public. This fanciful image was encouraged, no doubt, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who wrote, upon visiting the *ospedali:*

> Nothing surpasses the voluptuous, touching qualities of this music; the richness of artistry, the exquisite taste of the singing, the beauty of the voices, the justness of the execution—all combine in these delicious concerts to produce an impression, assuredly out of place, but irresistible to the human heart.... I felt a shudder of love such as I had never experienced before.[1]

Rousseau's love was rooted both in a respect for their musicianship, and a desire to meet the mysterious girls face-to-face:

> The church is always full of music lovers; even the singers from the Venetian opera come so as to develop genuine taste in singing based on these excellent models. What grieved me was those accursed grills, which allowed only tones to go through and concealed the angels of loveliness of whom they were worthy.[2]

Recently, however, several scholars have made an effort to uncover more factual information about the musical traditions and resources at the *ospedali.* A brief summary of their findings appears here, so that conductors may begin to create a more complete picture of this important musical microcosm.

While we must be prepared to revise some of our notions of the *ospedali,* we can be sure that the general quality of music-making at these institutions, particularly in the eighteenth century, was astoundingly high.

Origins of the *Ospedali*

There were four *ospedali* in service in Venice in the sixteenth, seventeenth,

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and eighteenth centuries: the Ospedale della Pietà, the Ospedale degl'Incurabili, the Ospedale di Santa Maria dei Derelitti, also called the *Ospedaletto,* and the oldest, the Ospedale di San Lazaro e dei Mendicanti. Of the four, only the Pietà was exclusively for orphans. Each served a separate philanthropic cause under the larger umbrella of the *ospedali grandi,* and most at one point or another gave refuge not just to girls, but also to men, women, and occasionally to whole families.

The Mendicanti, founded in the twelfth century as a hospital for Crusaders, eventually became a refuge for Venice's beggars, while the Incurabili was founded to serve those suffering from syphilis, as well as "repentant prostitutes."[3] The Derelitti opened its doors in the 1520s to children "who had lost both parents through death or irresponsible parenthood," as well as to drifters, boys headed for military service, and the ailing.[4] All three of these *ospedali* eventually set enrollment caps and admissions restrictions (such as proof of legitimate birth) for their inmates.

The Ospedale della Pietà, on the other hand, was unique in that it did just the opposite. Founded in 1336 by a Franciscan Friar named Pietro of Assisi, the Pietà accepted any infant of *illegitimate* birth, whom the anonymous mother could leave in a box (called a *scaffetta*), providing the child was still small enough to fit.[5] There were no limits on the number of children taken in, and by the eighteenth century it housed more than 4000.[6] All four of the *ospedali* were ruled by their own boards of governors (membership on these boards was very prestigious among Venetian nobility), and financed by a combination of private gifts, income generated by the students, and subsidies from the Venetian state.

From the sixteenth century on, the inmates at the *ospedali* lived a monastic lifestyle. Rising at dawn, they ordered their days on a rotation of prayer, work, and meals. Residents were expected to work for their room and board, and could even earn a small profit from some craft or skill. By 1600, all four *ospedali* had received approval from the Papacy to establish chapels, setting in place a regular rotation of services, and laying the groundwork for the musical *cori* which were to play a large role in the evolution of these institutions. Indeed, it wasn't long after regular observance of the divine Office began that the *cori* were formed. Seen as one further outlet for both the glorification of God and the support of industriousness among orphans, the governors of the *ospedali* began to pour resources into these budding music programs. It did not go unnoticed, of course, that patrons were more generous with their offerings in the presence of glorious music performed by such (seemingly) chaste young women.[7] Increasing importance was therefore given to cultivating the musical skills of the girls, and to granting admissions preference to those who showed some musical talent. By the eighteenth century, at the height of the fame of the *ospedali* music programs, "active searches for certain types of voices and musical skills became a way of life at all of the *ospedali* save the Pietà.... When found, the exceptional young women could be admitted outright without their having to measure up to any standards other than those determined by the music masters."[8]

Word of the beauty of the *ospedali* buildings, which had been designed and built by Venice's great artists, and of the abilities of their individual musicians, quickly began to reach far beyond the canals of Venice, and these institutions became the talk of Europe. As early as the seventeenth century, Venice was a

popular tourist destination for the European aristocracy on their Grand Tours. Visitors flocked to the canals to witness the Carnival celebrations, take in one of the dozen or so operas produced each season, and, of course, to make a pilgrimage to hear the *figlie di coro* at the *ospedali.* Travel journals and letters describing these experiences abound. Charles De Brosses, in his *Lettres,* describes how he preferred "the Zabetta, at the Incurabili, [for she] is certainly astonishing in the extent of her voice and the bow-strokes she has in her throat, as if she were wielding the violin of Somis," though he also had affection for "Margarita, of the Mendicanti, [who] is her equal and pleases me more."[9]

Due to the Pietà's willingness to take in all orphans, it grew far larger than the other three *ospedali,* and at least one spectator noted that it was clearly inferior musically to the others. The famous chronicler of musical culture, Charles Burney commented that "the compositions and performance [he] heard... did not exceed mediocrity," whereas upon his visit to the Incurabili, under the direction of Maestro Galuppi, he couldn't decide "whether [he] was most delighted with the composition, or with the execution."[10] Burney was also lucky enough to encounter a former *figlia di coro,* as he recounts in his diary:

> Signora Regina Zocchi had been prevailed on to come—she had been brought up as an orphan, but of a good family at the Hospital of Gl'Incurabili and had the advantage of being there under Hasse, but she is now well married and well received everywhere she chooses to go.… She has a powerful voice and sings charmingly with great execution in allegros and expression in slow movements.[11]

Hardly a visitor to the Venetian state in the eighteenth century missed a chance to hear at least one of the *cori* perform, and to comment on which band was the best.

The popularity of the *cori* became

such that there is a record at the Pietà of the governors agreeing, as early as 1688, to award the administratively savvy music director, Giacomo Spada, "with a third of the proceeds from the church collections, the rest to be distributed among the choir."[12] This represented just a portion of the income that the ladies earned while serving the *coro*. As their popularity increased in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, requests for them to perform outside the *ospedali* increased as well, though their appearances were carefully controlled by the governors.[13] The girls were also sought as some of the city's best music teachers, and some were allowed to take private students and to keep a portion of their earnings.

Adding to the fame of the *ospedali* was the fact that well-known, or at least well-regarded, composers were employed to direct the music. In many cases, the *ospedale* in question would, with strikingly acute foresight, hire a young composer into their service before he gained stature in the opera world, or at a high-ranking post in the local Basilica of San Marco. Vivaldi was one of the first of these. Appointed originally as a violin teacher at the Pietà when he was 25 years old, he immediately made a mark both at home and abroad with his forward-looking sacred music and *concerti*, and eventually as a composer of opera.

More established composers were sought as well. Baldassare Galuppi obviously considered a post at the *ospedali* to be desirable even after he had attained considerable fame throughout Europe, for he accepted a position at the Incurabili in 1762, at the ripe old age of 56; he held this position concurrently with that of *maestro di coro* at the Basilica di San Marco. *Maestri* were generally well paid, and the working conditions were ideal: composers were free to push compositional boundaries, and to write relatively difficult music for a well-trained body of musicians.

The Structure and Resources of the *Ospedali*

The structure of the music programs at the *ospedali* was a hierarchical one: the top dozen musicians received the honorable title *figlia di coro* (literally "choir girl"). These girls received their musical instruction directly from the salaried teaching staff, led by the *maestro di musica,* and managed more directly by a prioress (*la priora*). The *figlie* were instructed in singing and ornamentation, instrumental technique, keyboard accompaniment, and *solfeggi.* Each *figlia di coro* would then instruct several other pupils, who in turn would teach the youngest of the musicians. In order to become a *figlia di coro* at the Mendicanti, a girl took a threefold vow that bound her to teach her skills to at least two younger students, to work as

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a performer and teacher for at least ten years after her apprenticeship, and, most notably, never to perform in public after her departure from the *ospedale.* This last rule must have been ignored on more than a few occasions, since many of the *figlie* went on to have successful careers in opera.[14] Clearly, a great deal of responsibility came with the honor of joining such an august body, and a woman could be as old as thirty-four before completing her duties to the choir as a performer and teacher.[15] However, should she so choose, a woman could "carve for herself a career and a retirement within the establishment," by forfeiting her dowry and dedicating her life to the coro.[16] She could be promoted to *maestra di coro,* or otherwise serve the institution as a teacher or instrumentalist.

Membership in the larger *coro* at all of the *ospedali* was generally limited to a symbolic number, but *de facto* numbers often greatly exceeded the symbolic quotas. The Incurabili and Derelitti, for example, set the number at thirty-three, Jesus' age at the time of his crucifixion, but from year to year those numbers varied widely.[17]

Of course, not all of the *coro* were singers. About half the number served primarily as instrumentalists, forming the orchestra that accompanied the singers on most occasions. Two of the singers in each *coro* were designated as soloists, and it was for these women that many solo pieces were composed. Often they were listed by name in the manuscript sources, which fact has proved invaluable for dating works by *ospedale* composers.

That there were also outstanding instrumentalists in the *ospedali* is clear from many contemporary reports, such as that by Charles De Brosses in his letter of August 29,1739, in which he claimed that "the Chiaretta would

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surely be the first violin of Italy, if the Anna-Maria, of the Ospedaletto, did not surpass her."[18] Additionally, one need only look at the instrumental repertoire written for the *ospedali* to recognize that, though it would not challenge a modern professional orchestra, it certainly was not children's literature. In fact, much of the music written by *ospedale* composers was meant to be used at various other places, such as the Basilica di San Marco or other local churches, which often were staffed by professional singers and instrumentalists.

All manner of instruments were available for students to study at the *ospedali.* After keyboard instruments, there were full complements of strings of both the violin and the viol families (though the latter went out of fashion by the eighteenth century), and an unusual collection of wind instruments. The Pietà orchestra around 1700 included an eclectic assortment of strings, plus a theorbo, tromba marina, and a trombone.[19] After Vivaldi's death, clarinets, flutes, horns, and timpani were added to the inventory.[20] The instrument collection at the Pietà reflects both the rise and sudden decline of the music program: "the collection grew to include fifty-five instruments in the mid-eighteenth century and sixty-three in 1790. By 1801 ten instruments remained in the collection."[21] In 1669, the Mendicanti possessed thirteen ensemble instruments, including seven strings, "two theorbos, three trombones, and a bassoon,"[22] but later inventories showed a much wider range, including lutes, mandolins, cornetti, horns, flutes, and timpani.[23]

The instrumental forces at the Derelitti and Incurabili are less well cataloged, though it is notable that an overwhelming number of pieces identified as having been written for the Incurabili or Derelitti are scored simply for voices, strings, and organ.[24] Burney, however, is quick to note the use of two orchestras, "two organs, and two *pair* of French horns" (emphasis added) in a concert of works composed and directed by Galuppi at the Incurabili,[25] so it must be concluded that the available performing forces at each of the *ospedali* fluctuated widely according to the needs, resources, and, perhaps, the whims of the director.

Pinpointing the precise number of performers per vocal and string part in the *ospedali* performances—as has become fashionable with J. S. Bach's vocal works—proves an exhausting, and in certain cases futile, challenge. Evidence of every sort points to ensembles as small as twenty-four (choir and instruments combined), and as large as a vocal chorus of eighty. One fact is certainly clear: the number of performers in the chorus and string sections was by no means equivalent at all four *ospedali,* nor to each *maestro di musica,* and was more likely determined by the skill level of the girls, the availability of instruments, and the amount of space in which to place the ensembles. In proceedings of the governors of the Mendicanti in 1744, there was an agreement made to enlarge the "*cantoria,* or choir gallery, since it was too small to take the 80 girls of the choir."[26] This would suggest that, in the spirit of creating a spectacle for the tourists, those in charge desired to display them more effectively.

Even a quick browse through the repertoire from the *ospedali* confronts us with a point of interest: much of this repertoire is written for SATB choir, and the *ospedali cori* were comprised of all women and girls. As performers, it is tempting to sidestep the natural question of who sang the tenor and bass parts, but what we discover by investigating this question is that, in fact, many performance opportunities are available to us, from within the SATB repertoire, for non-SATB ensembles. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of historical studies of the *ospedali* avoid the question completely, since it is, to understate the case, a complex issue. However, if the goal of historical scholarship is to inform performance, it would seem vital to attack this question head on.

The determining fact is that there appears to be no evidence of male performers either from contemporary accounts of performances or from extant governance records from the *ospedali;* nor would men and women even have been allowed to perform together in such a setting.[27] Yet, in a substantial number of works for the *ospedali,* parts for the bass and tenor appear.

Scholars who have dared to weigh in on this issue seem to agree that there are three possible explanations: (1) the women sang the tenor and bass parts at the notated pitch; (2) the women sang either or both the tenor and bass parts transposed up one or two octaves; (3) the tenor and bass parts were never intended to be sung by the women of the *ospedali,* and were simply omitted.[28] It seems that option (3) is unlikely: Michael Talbot cites the independence of each vocal line in the "Et in terra pax" movement of Vivaldi's *Gloria* RV 588 (Figure 1); were one voice simply omitted, the entire structure of the piece would fall apart.[29] Our histori-

cal spy Burney, however, noted that "as the chorusses are wholly made up of female voices, they are never in more than three parts, often only in two; but these, when reinforced by instruments, have such an effect, that the full complement to the chords is not missed."[30] This very well could have worked in the "Et misericordia" of the same composer's *Magnificat* RV 610 (Figure 2). So it must remain possible that, aside from music composed expressly for women's voices, there could have been occasions on which the tenor or bass part was simply omitted, and covered instead by the instrumental doubling.

Conventional wisdom leads us to believe that, while there certainly were

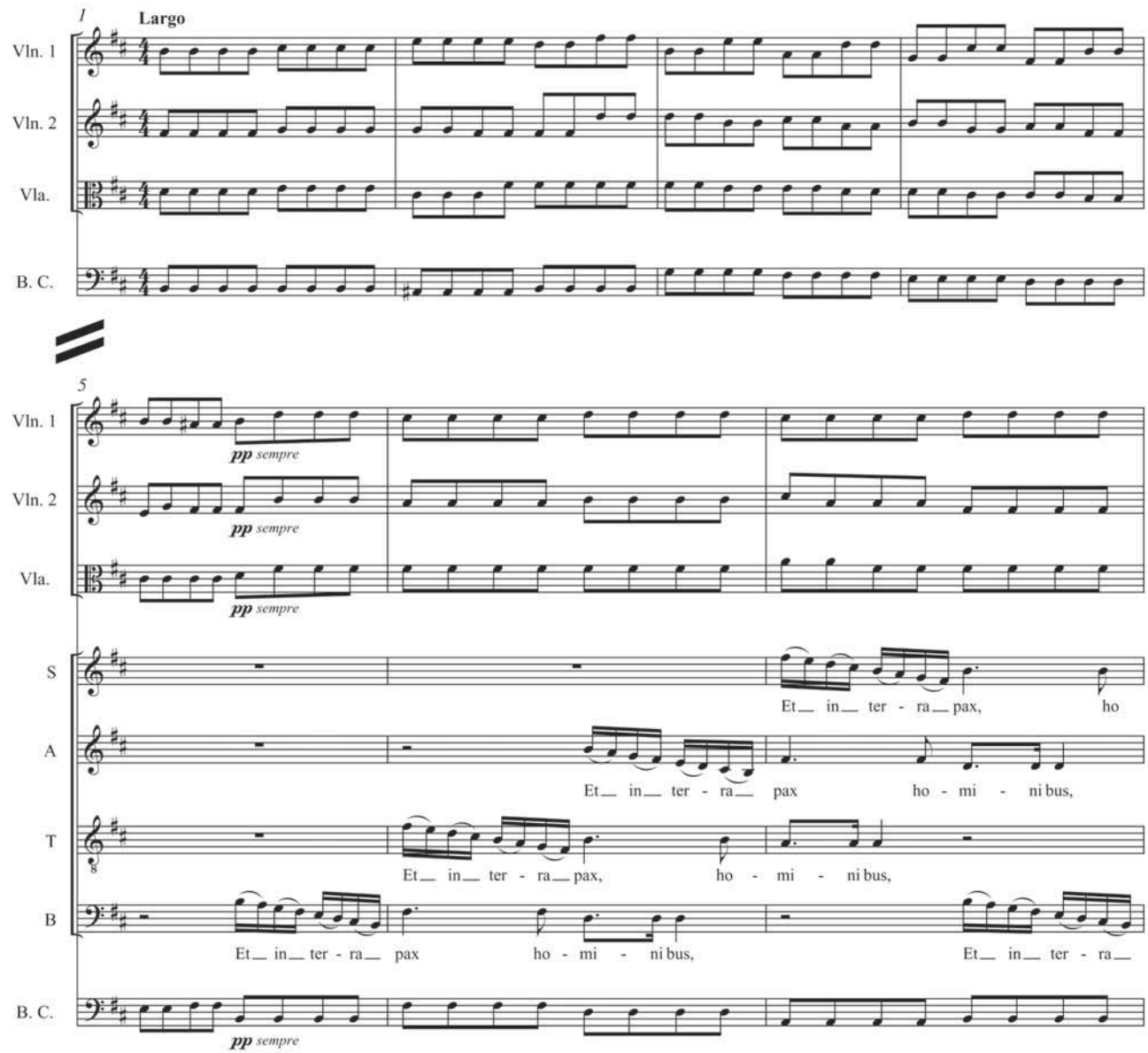

Figure 1. Antonio Vivaldi, *Gloria,* RV 588, "Et in terra pax," mm. 1–7.

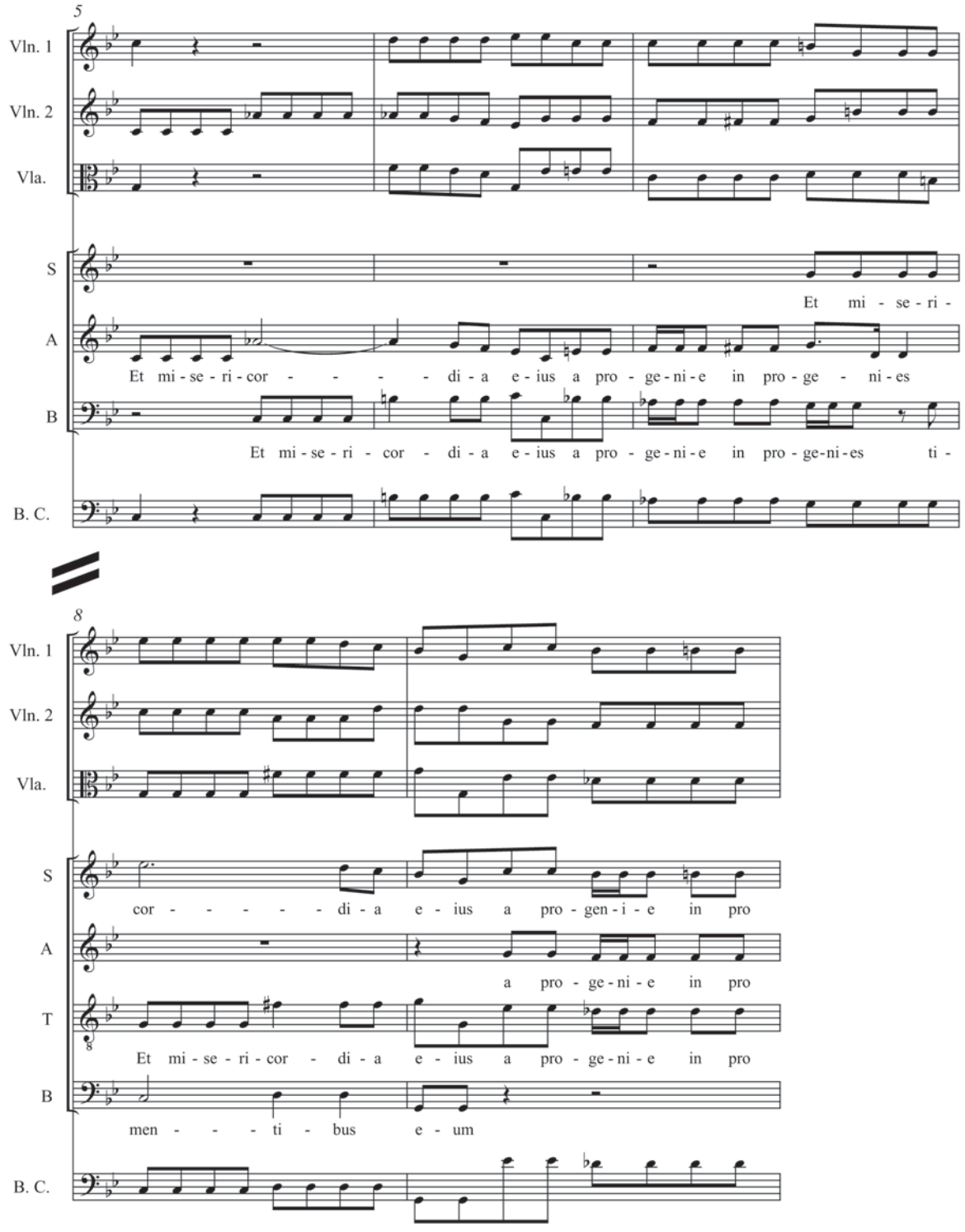

Figure 2. Antonio Vivaldi, *Magnificat,* RV 610, "Et misericordia," mm. 5–9.

women who could have sung the bass pitches in their notated register, these women would have been rare. The tenor lines, however, are certainly attainable by female singers, and therefore could have been (and in many cases probably were) sung at pitch. However, current research is leading us to the surprising conclusion that, in fact, there were women in the *ospedali* that sang the bass and tenor parts at pitch. Researcher Micky White (who even went so far as to move into the Pietá), notes that there can be no mistaking the vocal ranges, as the names of the singers, such as Anna 'del basso', were often written into the partbooks.[31] Furthermore, evidence indicates that some of these women stayed in the *ospedali* for their entire lives; a woman trained as a singer from a young age, and now well into her fifties or sixties, certainly could be capable of singing in the bass range—ask any church choir director! The case of Anna 'del basso' is a fine example: she lived from 1670 to 1742, most of it probably in the Pietá.[32]

However, given that the resources of the *ospedali* were in constant flux, there may indeed have been times when transposition was the only option, in which case the bass part, and sometimes also the tenor part, were transposed up an octave. Notwithstanding problems of voice-leading and melodic contour, this certainly seems like a feasible option.[33]

Even our cursory discussion of tenor and bass parts in this repertoire reveals why so many scholars have simply avoided the subject; this leaves the performer no choice but to take the SATB scoring at face value, or to provide his or her own alternate solution. Until more evidence is unearthed, we must continue to speculate and experiment with the various options, settling only for what seems most musically appropriate. Talbot logically points out that there was probably not just one solution, for the scope of the discussion covers four different locations, and spans nearly two centuries. In all likelihood, it was a combination of all of these solutions.[34] This author, however, urges the director of a women's choir to consider that there may be a yet-untapped body of music available to them with a minimum of fuss, whether they transpose, or teach their girls and adult women to access their lower register.

The End of the *Ospedali*

Though the quality of their music and their fame as a tourist destination rose slowly and were at their height in the middle of the eighteenth century, their descent was sudden; by the end of that century the *ospedali* and their *cori* were in financial ruin, and had all but abandoned their music programs. By the time of the dissolution of the Venetian republic in 1797 most had turned over their operations to the state, and the music that had thrilled international audiences for over a century ceased almost completely. Nevertheless, the impression that the *ospedali* and their musicians had made on the thousands of spectators was not forgotten. These four institutions, as a result of their widespread fame throughout Europe in the eighteenth century, served as models for what was to become the modern conservatory, first in Paris, London, and Leipzig, and eventually worldwide.

As scholars and performers continue to explore the rich musical heritage that represents the *ospedali* at the height of their fame, it is an investigation of individual time periods, and of specific institutions, composers, and performers. It is a vast body of repertoire encompassing the styles and resources of many years and many personalities. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the overview presented here of musical life at the *ospedali* can serve as a starting point for those performers who wish to develop a more thorough understanding of the specific circumstances surrounding a given piece

Discography

Galuppi, Baldassare. *Musica Sacra.* Angelica Girls' Choir, Savaria Baroque Orchestra, Fabio Pirona. Hungaroton Classic 31828

Vivaldi, Antonio. *Gloria - Magnificat.* Taverner Consort and Players, Andrew Parrott. Virgin Classics 3647992.

_____. *Gloria.* King's College Choir, Cambridge, Academy of Ancient Music, Stephen Cleobury, EMI Classics 0724355726520.

from any of the four *ospedali.* Furthermore, a large part of the historical record of these institutions has yet to be cataloged and incorporated into modern study, and so there still remains the hope that many of our questions about the performance of this repertoire will someday be answered.

NOTES

[1] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Les confessions,* Seconde Partie, Livre Septième (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1964), 371–72, quoted in Daniel Heartz, *Music in European Capitals; The Galant Style, 1720–80* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2003), 183.

[2] Rousseau, as quoted in H. C. Robbins Landon, *Vivaldi, Voice of the Baroque* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 31.

[3] Jane L. Baldauf-Berdes, *Women Musicians of Venice: Musical Foundations 1525–1855* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 55.

[4] Baldauf-Berdes, 59.

[5] Joan Whittemore, "Revision of Music Performed at the Venetian *Ospedali* in the Eighteenth Century" (DMA diss., University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 1986), 6.

[6] Baldauf-Berdes, 48.

[7] Whittemore, 1986, 21.

[8] Baldauf-Berdes, 119.

[9] Charles De Brosses, *Lettres familières sur l'Italie 1739–40* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1931). Excerpt translated by Bruce Alan Brown.

[10] Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (Elibron Classics, 2005), 139 and 148.

[11] Charles Burney, *Music, Men, and Manners in France and Italy* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1974), 83.

[12] Denis Arnold, "Orphans and Ladies: The Venetian Conservatoires (1680–1790)", *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association, 89th Session (1962–63),* 33. Arnold notes that it was perhaps due to Spada's talent as an administrator that music at the *ospedali* advanced to the level that it did.

[13] Arnold, 1962, 34.

[14] Baldauf-Berdes, 143.

[15] M. V. Constable, "The Venetian 'Figlie del Coro': Their Environment and Achievement" *Music and Letters,* 63/4 (July-Oct, 1982), 192.

[16] Constable, 196.

[17] Baldauf-Berdes, 125.

[18] De Brosses.

[19] Baldauf-Berdes, 171.

[20] Eleanor Selfridge-Field, *Venetian Instrumental Music from Gabrieli to Vivaldi* (New York, Dover Publications, 1994), 43.

[21] Baldauf-Berdes, 171.

[22] Selfridge-Field, 45.

[23] Baldauf-Berdes, 171.

[24] Joan Whittemore, *Music of the Venetian Ospedali Composers: A Thematic Catalogue* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1995).

[25] Burney, 2005, 148.

[26] Denis Arnold, "Music at the Mendicanti in the Eighteenth Century," *Music and Letters,* 65/4 (Oct., 1984), 350.

[27] Whittemore, 1986, 12.

[28] Michael Talbot, *Venetian Music in the Age of Vivaldi* (Hampshire, GB: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1999), 124.

[29] Talbot, 132.

[30] Burney, 2005, 142.

[31] Micky White, "The Pietà in Vivaldi's Day," <http://www.spav.co.uk>.

[32] Richard Vendome, "Women tenors and basses—a brief introduction," <http://www.spav.co.uk>.The Schola Pietatis Antonio Vivaldi, a musical organization dedicated to performing the works of Vivaldi based on this premise, hosts a very simple but informative Web site about this subject, and includes striking recordings of their work.

[33] Andrew Parrot makes a very convincing argument in favor of the transposition with his recording of both Vivaldi's *Gloria* and *Magnificat.* He performs both works with the tenor and bass parts transposed up a single octave.The result is that, although the tenor line occasionally rises above the soprano line, the harmony and voice-leading remain quite intact, and at times even gain a bit of intensity due to the proximity of voices in dissonant passages. Vivaldi, Antonio. *Gloria–Magnificat.* Taverner Consort and Players, Andrew Parrott. Virgin Classics 3647992.

[34] In her 1986 dissertation, however, Joan Whittemore takes a detailed look at this issue, using works composed for the *ospedali* and revised for use elsewhere (or vice versa) to demonstrate the various practices composers may have used in this circumstance.