

The Bones of Antonio Vivaldi

4th District (Wieden), Technisches Universität facing Karlsplatz

Surely one of the most recognisable pieces of Baroque classical music must be the Four Seasons (Vier Jahreszeiten) by Italian composer Vivaldi. And surely one of the least-known facts about Vivaldi's life must be that he died and was buried in Vienna.

Born in Venice in 1678, Antonio Vivaldi was the red-haired youngest of six children whose father was a violinist at St. Mark's Cathedral. Vivaldi too studied violin at the church and in 1703 was ordained; thereafter he was referred to affectionately as the "Red Priest".



Although only in his mid-20s he soon became a virtuosic violinist whose fast and furious playing, accompanied by the angelic girl voices of the Ospedale della Pietà (an orphanage where he was senior violin teacher), drew audiences from far and wide. Elsewhere in Europe Vivaldi was also fast becoming a renowned and distinctive composer of both concertos and operas.

In 1911 his twelve concertos entitled L'Estro Armonico were published in Amsterdam: in Germany Bach copied and arranged 6 of them. However, successful as his concertos were, it was opera that he devoted most of his time to, eventually penning more than fifty. He also became composer-manager at the Sant'Angelo and San Moise theatres in Venice and by 1718 was also working in Mantua as well as touring Italy. Vivaldi had become the Baroque period's first superstar.

Eventually, the composer embarked on a relationship with a young soprano, Anna Giro, creating something of a scandal when she accompanied him on his tours during the 1730s. Some commentators have claimed it was this that eventually made living in his native Venice difficult, forcing him to flee to Vienna in mid-1740 and seek patronage from the Austrian Emperor Karl VI (1711-40). However, although Vivaldi had indeed been honoured by the Emperor during a visit to Trieste in 1728, there is no evidence that he attempted to contact the monarch on his arrival in Vienna, nor his successor Empress Maria Theresa (1740-80) or her husband Franz Stefan von Lothringen.

Whatever the reason Vivaldi came to Vienna, it is known that he lived in an apartment in a 4-storey house above the Kärtnertor gate, one of eight gateways that penetrated the city's old fortifications. Now long demolished, the building stood on Philharmoniker Strasse, approximately where the famous Hotel Sacher now stands. Also long gone is the old Kärtnertor Theatre where a dozen Vivaldi operas were staged between 1731 and 1746. From this we must deduce that he was a composer of considerable renown in the city.

Antonio Vivaldi died in his apartment in late July 1741 and was given a modest funeral attended by six choristers, one of whom was the 9-year old Josef Haydn. He was laid to rest in a cemetery known as the Spitaler Gottesacker located just outside the city walls (cemeteries within the city walls had been closed for health reasons by Emperor Ferdinand I (1521-64) in 1530). It was close to the Baroque Karlskirche, built in 1716, and its name referred to the fact that it also contained the remains of executed criminals. In 1783 the cemetery was abandoned by order of Emperor Josef II (1765-90) who decreed that new cemeteries be opened outside the old Linienwall (today's Gürtel).

Vivaldi's remains were never retrieved or re-located and were consequently lost. Later still,

between 1815 and 1818, Vienna's Technical University (Technische Universität) was built on the former cemetery site. Only a simple stone wall plaque, erected in 1978 on the wall of the University to celebrate the 300th anniversary of his birth, tells the passer-by that the bones of the composer Antonio Vivaldi still lie somewhere below.

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