

Bach and vivaldi: the truth of the matter essay sample

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Johann Sebastian Bach is definitely one of the greatest composers of all time. He is to music as a composer, perhaps what Shakespeare is to literature as a poet and playwright. To complete the analogy, Antonio Vivaldi is to the life of Bach what Christopher Marlowe had been to Shakespeare. There are times when two great artists coexist, but one gets to sit on the throne of fame and popularity. Such was the case of Bach and Vivaldi. Even as this paper is being written, Bach's popularity over Vivaldi is very evident because there is a red crooked line under each *Vivaldi*, signifying only that Vivaldi is not known to as many learned people that know and recognize Johann Sebastian Bach.

Bach was a fan of Vivaldi (Holland, 2007 p. 5). Yet, Bach's influence in music is much greater than that of Vivaldi. In the case of Shakespeare and Marlowe, it is commonly said that had Marlowe lived longer, he might have taken the seat of Shakespeare. Because he died early, Shakespeare, who somehow learned from him, has the biggest name in Literature. But Vivaldi did not die at an early age to have possibly left the world without a great number of compositions. What's more, Vivaldi did have a great number of compositions that could have earned him a seat in classical baroque music at least. How is it possible for a source of influence become the lesser known of the two?

It is understandable and evident that Bach had earned his seat in the world of music because of his genius. He ranks among Mozart, Beethoven, and Brahms and some even rank him as the greatest. However, the dominance of his influence in music had some reasons. If he had been influenced by the

music of Vivaldi, what had that influence have to do with his legacy to the future generations of music?

Born from a family of musicians, Bach's father, Johann Ambrosius, was the director of the musicians of the Thuringia's town of Eisenach and was a court trumpeter for the Duke of Eisenach Court. The Bach family has been known throughout Thuringia for being organists, town instrumentalists, and Cantors. Hence, the Bach family had a reputation for their musical talent. Hence, Johann Sebastian's talent was not surprising at all. He was indeed expected to be a thriving musician, only, the legacy he left in music exceeded expectations (*Johann Sebastian Bach* , section 1)

The Bach Family was probably well to do, considering that they had a spacious house in Eisenach. Sebastian had the luxury to study in the same Latin Grammar School where Martin Luther had schooling once. In that school, he also learned about the scriptures, thereby strengthening his Lutheran faith. Lutheran faith actually had a strong hold in Eisenach, for it was the place where Luther went into hiding when he translated the New Testament in German (*Johann Sebastian Bach* , section 1).

He had his early training in playing the harpsichord and the violin under his father. Meanwhile, Johann Christoph Bach (not to be confused with his brother whose name is also Johann Christoph), Bach's well-known uncle, who was then at the Georgenkirche, Eisenach, trained him the ability of playing organ. Because he was very serious with his art, Sebastian soon became extraordinarily proficient with the instruments. His gift in music was not

limited to his proficiency in playing musical instruments, for the Latin Grammar School discovered his wonderful soprano voice when joined the Geogenkirche choir (*Ibid*).

His parents had died by the time he was ten, so his elder brother Johann Christoph took him and his other brother Johann Jakob to Ohrdruf. There, his brother continued his straining in harpsichord and organ (Sheranne, 2007 par. 1). He also had the opportunity to be exposed to the compositions of Pachelbel, Johan Caspar Kerll and Jakob Froberger, especially when his brother encouraged him to study composition and set Sebastian to imitating music by the above mentioned German organist composers. He continued to attend school at the Ohrdruf Gymnasium (grammar school), where he made excellent progress in Latin, Greek, and theology. Like in Eisenach, scholars were members of the choir and the cantor had high regard for Bach's musical potentials and singing voice (Johann Sebastian Bach, sections 2 & 3).

His wonderful soprano voice earned him a position the " Mettenchor" of St. Martin's School in Lüneburg at fifteen (Sherrane 2007 par. 2 and *Johann Sebastian Bach*). However, as he grew older, his soprano voice vanished. Nevertheless, he remained in the choir as an accompanist playing the violin or harpsichord. While he was there he met Georg Böhm, who introduced him to the great organ traditions of Hamburg.

As he traveled mainly on foot, he was exposed to French instrumental music when he had the chance to play at the Court of Celle. It was still part of

Germany, but the taste of the people in arts including music was highly influenced by the French (*Johann Sebastian Bach* , section 3). He became a church violinist in Arnstadt at the age of 18 (1703). At the age of 20 (1705), he took a leave of absence and traveled on foot to see the great Dietrich Buxtehude play the organ in concert (Sherrane, 2007 par. 2).

Sometime between 1713 and 1717 Bach became interested in the new Italian music. He became a fan of Antonio Vivaldi, and because of his interest in the works of Vivaldi, he transcribed the works of the Italian composer and suited them to different majors and other instruments (Holland, 2000, p. 5; *Johann Sebastian Bach* , section 10; and Guttman 2004, par. 6). Throughout his life, he held different positions in church music in different places in Germany. He composed orchestras, cantatas, concertos, and perfected the fugue and contributed to the development of polyphonic music. He died as a respected master of music, though he was buried in an unmarked tomb in St. John's Cemetery (Johann Sebastian Bach, section 11).

Antonio Vivaldi's life was also colorful, but he did not enjoy the recognition that Sebastian enjoyed in his life. Unlike Sebastian, Vivaldi was the son of a barber, although his father was formerly a violinist, so the latter was able to teach his son the art. In 1703, he was ordained as a priest. Some sources say that he had bronchial asthma, so he did not have the stamina to complete a mass, but some sources say that he had it as an excuse for him to be able to pursue his career in music. He must have attended the seminary, because it was the only way a poor boy like him could have attended school for free (*Antonio Vivaldi* , par. 1; Guttman, 2004 par. 4)

A year after going out of the seminary, Vivaldi was employed at Ospedale della Pieta as a violin teacher. There, he taught girls, daughters of noblemen to mistresses. The Ospedale was, hence, well endowed with facilities and services by the fathers of the orphaned girls. The music taught there should then be among the finest in Venice. He kept on writing concertos and operas for Ospedale for the rest of his life and got paid for it (*Antonio Vivaldi* , Guttman, 2004).

He traveled to different places like Versailles and Prague where he staged operas and concertos including *The Four Seasons* . In all his endeavors as a composer and musician, his biographers have no record of where he got his influences as a composer and whose styles he imitated or transcribed. By the 1730s he still composed concertos and operas in great numbers, but only to sell them. He said it was easier to earn that way. So when he died, he was buried, not as a master of music, but as a pauper (*Antionio Vivaldi*).

Both Bach and Vivaldi wrote concertos, operas, sonatas, and religious music. But Bach wrote cantatas and fugue, which were not mentioned in the biographies of Vivaldi. Both composers were prolific in their entire career. However, Vivaldi's works have only been recently being found. For example, it was only in 1926, when 300 of his concertos were retrieved. In 2004, Gutmann (2004) had the count of his works as follows: 39 operas, 73 sonata and over 500 (and more a re being uncovered) concertos) plus religious compositions.

Records about their lives set the difference in their career as composers.

Many of Vivaldi's works have not been attributed to him because he sold them by piece, for he needed the money. While it is true that he had made a living out of being a composer and staging his compositions, one could imagine how many of his works from 1703 to 1740 have not been under his name, those are only the ones he wrote for Ohrdurf. He sold more compositions during the 1730s.

On the contrary, Bach had sole ownership of his compositions – even those he transcribed from the works of Vivaldi. There is no doubt that Bach had already been an established and skilled musician and composer by the time he came across the works of Vivaldi, but the works of Vivaldi had an impact on his later works. Because Bach was the bigger name in music, the style that was supposed to be attributed to Vivaldi was attributed to Bach. Furthermore, considering that Bach's name was more associated with baroque music, he got more of the credits than Vivaldi.

Vivaldi's compositions were widely imitated, because of the growing popularity of the style. However, since there was need for new compositions, when Vivaldi died, because he had few compositions under his name, they were forgotten and many of his other compositions, though great, remained unknown, only to be discovered in the 20th century when the history of arts had already proclaimed the greatest masters of music.

Still, Vivaldi's legacy is very evident in *The Four Seasons*. He was able to bridge the gap between different forms of musical compositions while

combining different movements of notes to create the mood and draw the picture of the scenario he wanted to show. Indeed, he painted sceneries with his music the way ballerinas told stories with their dance and poets with their words.

It should not be mistaken, though that Bach is to be discarded as a great composer, for he was also a musical genius, leaving to the world the fugue and the perfected polyphonic music. Church officials, were at first critical about the polyphonic sound, but Bach was able to make polyphonic music reach popularity and wide acceptance during his lifetime. Now, we enjoy the fruits of his labor, not only with classical music, but also with modern gadgets, so we have cellular phones that have polyphonic tunes and music players that make us hear every detail of the composition like mp3, mp4, and mp5.

Much has been said about Vivaldi's influence on the style of Bach's concerto. However, If we compare Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* (1725) and Bach's *Brandenburg* we can find similarities in the movements within the parts of the concertos. The reason for the choice of pieces account for the following: 1) both are concertos, 2) *The Four Seasons* is the best known work of Vivaldi and *Brandenburg* is the benchmark of baroque music (Simone, 1999 par. 1), and 3) both compositions came after Bach was exposed to Italian music.

The tones of certain parts the concertos in Bach's *Brandenburg* may be mistakenly attributed to Vivaldi by someone who does not know them well and who has heard it for the first time after hearing *The Four Seasons*.

However, towards the middle and the end of the concertos of *Brandenburg*, we see the variation in the composition of Bach towards creating a lighter feeling, unlike the *Summer III* in *The Four Seasons* and some of its other parts that tend to be heavy.

The Four Seasons moves from E major in Concerto 1 (Spring) starting with Allegro, then Largo, then Allegro Pastorale. In Concerto No. 2 (Summer), the key switches to G minor beginning with Allegro non molto, then Adagio e piano moving towards Presto e forte, followed by Presto. The third concerto (Autumn) is in F major and starts with Allegro, then Adagio molto, then Allegro. Concerto No. 4 (Winter) switches to F minor starting with Allegro non molto, then Largo, then finishing with Allegro. Hence in a Concerto, there are three to four movements.

In *Brandenburg*, the movements are uniform in every concerto: Concerto No. 1: Allegro Moderato, Concerto No. 2: Allegro Moderato, Concerto No. 3: Allegro Moderato, Concerto No. 4: Allegro, Concerto No. 5: Affectuoso, and Concerto No. 6: Allegro.

Both the compositions had staccato and legato parts that blend well.

Vivaldi's work was mainly for string instruments – violin, viola, cello, etc.

Bach's concerto was arranged for string instruments, brass wind, woodwind and keyboards.

The presence of similarities in their compositions and the adoption of the allegro movement in the composition of Bach may be evidence of Vivaldi's influence on the prior, but it should not be taken as Bach's undoing a s

composer, for he only followed the Italian Concerto Grosso Style (Simone, 1999). Even Vivaldi must have only followed that style in which he became well versed.

If Vivaldi ever influenced Bach's style, it was already in a time when Bach had his training from his father, uncle, brother and exposure to the styles of different German organists and French music. It was not solely Vivaldi that created Bach. He did not even create Bach. Bach could have existed without Vivaldi and could have developed the style he developed even without Vivaldi for it was not Vivaldi who pioneered the Italian Concerto Grosso Style. It just so happened that Vivaldi was probably the best of the best Italian musicians and composers then, so Bach learned from him more than from any other Italian.

Bach was more than just an imitator, though many of Vivaldi's biographers and fanatics may put it that way. Vivaldi could have had more influence in music that he has had if he did not sell his works, but that does not assure that music scholars of the future generations would give his work more regards. He may have written concertos that are superior to some of the concertos of Bach, but the totality of the quality of the works of Bach may still prove to be more fascinating than Vivaldi's.

Bach's name echoed in the baroque era of music more because his music was mainly church music. Because of his popularity and greatness in composing church music, he was the composer benchmark of baroque music in the same way that Mozart is in classical music and Beethoven in classical

and romantic. His being a benchmark composer of the era must have called the attention of more music scholars than Vivaldi. Hence, it is only with efforts of the few who took interest in the life and works of Vivaldi that we are beginning to unearth the secrets about his life and the true richness of his compositions.

Bach's compositions like *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring* and *Brandenburg* can make a person feel euphoric and light, yet some of his compositions like the *cellosuites* can turn a different tide in a person's feelings. Vivaldi's compositions can do the same, for he too is a great composer.

Together, Bach and Vivaldi left a legacy that can be compared to no material treasure. Bach left a legacy of sonatas, concertos, cantatas, operas, fugue, and polyphonic music. He left a legacy of church music that can resound in chapels as renditions of angels for God. He has left a legacy of heavenly music that future generations of musicians, especially church musicians ought to emulate – music with value that transcends time and trends.

Vivaldi's newly found works show a great range of styles and movements. He introduced the three part majestic concerto, the best example of which is *The Four Seasons*. Though he wrote a good number of operas, sonatas, and church music, he is notable for his polyphonic compositions in his concertos. Now that more and more of his works are being found, the concertos he wrote become the legacies he has left musical scholars, for his unknown styles are yet to be discovered.

As master composers of their time and ours, Bach and Vivaldi have left us with a generous legacy. The types of music they produced are living testaments that high quality music knows no boundaries in time and space. Wherever a person is, whatever era, if their compositions are wonderfully executed, they can create good lasting impressions. The inspiration this brings to future musicians to produce music of the same quality is yet another legacy that promises the future generations that there will always be “real music” in the coming decades, centuries to come.

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