

Vivaldi and the Pietà

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In picture of the “Partenza del Bucintoro” by Antonio Stom, the Pietà is perfectly shown, which is the large red building in the centre of the painting. The main door, is that of the church. Beside the Pietà to the left is a row of shops, (where the present church now stands). Among of which a chemist, a hat shop, a pork butcher, and a dry cleaner. This is the scene that Vivaldi was familiar with in his lifetime.

But what was the Pietà?

Let's first explain what the Pietà was not: A School for Girls, a Musical Academy, an Orphanage, or a Convent.

It WAS an institution for unwanted and abandoned children. Known as “Ospedale della Pietà”. “Ospedale” in this sense is Hospice, and not “Hospital” In Venice at the time of Vivaldi were 4 main “Ospedali” the Mendicant, being the biggest which was for the Poor, war wounded, the homeless, and the Nobility who had fallen on hard times, the “Ospedaletto” for orphans, the “Incurabile” for those with incurable diseases and the Pietà. Babies would be put in a niche in the wall called the “Scaffetta” by the mother, relative, Parish Priest who had found a baby left on the roadside. The child was sent either into the country or in Venice, to be brought up by the wet nurses that the Pietà employed, and then returned to Venice after several years, to start life at the Pietà.

The boys were separated from the girls, and then left at the age of 16, having been trained in skills such as Stone cutting, cotton beating and weaving, in preparation for a job in later life. The women had 3 options, to become nuns, but few entered into convents, marriage, or to live at the Pietà all their lives. The majority, stayed. They were well looked after, had food and a roof over their heads, but they were put to work. Inside the Institution, the woman were in 2 categories, the Musicians and non Musicians, known as the “Figlie di Coro” and the “Figlie di Comun”, they would do the sewing, embroidery, silk and cotton weaving, and take care of various tasks in the institution, they would then sell the work they produced.

The musicians were the elite of the Pietà. In Vivaldi's day there were 60 or 70 in the Coro. They however also worked and earned their living always within the Institution, they had their own separate rooms and apartments. One of the most lucrative sources of revenue, was to have a “Figlia in Educazione”. The Rich and noble families of Venice and Italy would send their daughters to be educated, at the Pietà, and whom ever received these Children had the title of “Una Figlie Privilegiata”. There were only 14 from the coro, and 10 from the Figlie di Comun. Who were allowed this privilege.

The head of the household was the Priora, who was in charge of everything that happened in the Institution. The next senior posts were the 2 Maestre di Coro, and then the 2 “Scrivane”, whose responsibility it was to look after all the babies who entered the Pietà, they oversaw the wet nurses, both in House, Venice and in the Country, paid their salaries, and were present in any disputes there might have been with parents. A mother or the family could claim their child back at any time.

The Pietà was a huge concern, there were to a large extent they were self-sufficient, a great deal of food and wine came from the property that was owned in the country. They had a bakery and a bank.

The Pietà was overall governed by about 30 noble and wealthy Venetians.

Painting: By kind permission of Querini Stampalia Venezia: Photograph by Micky White

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The Pietà as it is today. The building to the right of the church is now the Metropole Hotel, but still owned by the Pietà. Photograph by Micky White ©

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It was in this “Calle” that the scaffetta was situated, on the left, there are 2 doors, the first clearly visible, and the second a little further where the 2 men are walking. In the overhead passage, a spy-hole, was placed so the “Portinara”, could see who was at the door, when the bell was rung to announce a new arrival.

Usually the individual bringing the baby would place it in the scaffetta and leave, but occasionally some might ring, where a dialogue would take place, and a word of encouragement might lead to the mother taking her baby home. The infants were left for a number of reasons, poverty, no milk from the mother, father away in the navy or prison, but by far the most common reason was illegitimacy and children born through prostitution.

When the “Portinara” had taken the baby from the scaffetta, she would first examine it for disease, or lice. The clothes the baby had been wrapped in were removed and either thrown away if in a very bad state or sold, in a shop within the Pietà. The room where the babies were brought was bare, with no heat, with only a table.

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Branding:

The next move of the Portinara was to call the “Medico Chirugo” who would brand the baby on the upper left arm, with the sign of the “P”. This practice was to protect the baby when it was taken for its first few years of life to the country or Venice from theft. Later in the 18th century it was branded on the sole of the foot. This then died out in the 19th century as being thought of as barbaric.

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Every baby was registered in the book known as the “Libro della Scaffetta”, this was the job of the “Scrivana”.

This page shows at the top the date, and hour of entry, on the left the scaffetta number, which goes consecutively, this number is often referred to later in their lives, for example when one married, her number would be quoted, in the minute book.

The baby was given a name by the scrivana, regardless of whether the mother had named it herself or not. A full and detailed description of clothing was then written, and any abnormalities the baby might have had e.g. one ear. The cross by the name of Brigida donates death in infancy, as she died only 2 months after being brought to the Pietà. The place of death is also carefully registered.

These entries give us a great deal of information about the families who left these babies, and also the daily life in 1715.

I will transcribe and explain each of the 3 examples we have here.

1715 à di 20 Luglio à hore due

P. 5372 Pietro nas:te con due pezzi di fassa nove; fustagno novo rigado. paneselo di fiocheto novo: et un pocco di carta involta con mezzo soldo, e posta trà le fascie:
a di 21 d:to fù Batt:o nella nostra chiesa dal S.D: Fran:co Bazzatto con il sud:o nome more solito.

The date is the 20th July 1715 at 2 hours: the time of day was different than it is today. ½ an hour after sunset was Hore 1 So in mid July the sunsets at roughly 9.30 pm so “Hore 2” is about midnight they changed their clocks about every 12 days. Most people brought the babies either 2 hours before sunset, at sunset or 1 or 2 hours after sunset. Which tells us that the Venetians were at home either having their meal, or having turned in for the night. Their days were governed by the rhythm of the sun, shops and churches opening at daybreak.

The Scrivana named the baby Pietro, he was new born, and he was wrapped in new swaddling clothes, and a rigid piece of new felt. There was a note tucked in among his clothes. He was baptized the following day by the Chaplin of the Pietà.

From this description he was probably from a family that were not poverty stricken, but were no wealthy either.

A di d.to a hore 3

P. 5373 Marta de g:ni 6 con fassa strazza; strazon de griso doreto; é due strazze bianche.

Marta is 6 days old, and was brought in a hore 3 and was dressed in rags; griso is a very rough woollen material. A 2 while rags, also baptized the following day by the Chaplin of the Pietà.

She comes from poor a family.

A di d.to a hore 7

P. 5374 Brigida nas:te involta in strazze bianche.

This baby is just wrapped in rags and nothing else, which suggests the family was very poor or she was born due to prostitution, as there is no care taken whatsoever, and these entries have a feeling of guilt or shame attached to them. She is brought at 5am. Whoever brought her made sure that it was a time when no one was around, as although the entry is about 5am which is just about daybreak, when life would be starting, by the time she was taken in by the portinara, been branded, and the scrivana had registered her, that process would have taken about an hour, so she would have been transported in dead of night.

She died 2 months later. Photograph by Micky White © Property of Micky White

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The daily Menu dated 1712, shows very clearly the order of seniority, headed by the Maestre and Figlie di Coro, then the "Putte Grande", the Non muscians, who were aged 18 and over, "Putte Mezzane" aged 14 – 18, "Putte Piccole" 10 – 14 year olds, "Putte di Ritorno" those who returned from Domestic Service in families in Venice, these would be 15 to about 18, and finally the boys.

Photograph Archivio di Stato di Venezia.

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From Sunday to Tuesday they received a stew with rice, and Beef they all had bread and wine, the musicians had the greater quantity, the Putte Mezzane and the Piccole have cheese in addition to the Beef. The Putte di Ritorno and the Boys do not get the Beef.

Wednesdays Eggs are given as opposed to beef, for all but the Putte di Ritorno and the Boys.

Fridays Cheese is on the menu, they had "Formaggio Salà and "Formaggio dolce"

Saturdays they have fish. The boys in addition receive fruit, but the women do not.

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The windows on the right hand side of the picture, with small ledges at the top are those of the Music Room. It was in this room in which Vivaldi gave his music lessons, the Figlie di Coro practiced, and Concerts were given to visiting nobles and Royalty from Italy and Europe. It would have been in this room where the famous Gloria of Vivaldi would have been first heard in practice form by the neighbours. Before finally been performed as part of the Mass in the Chapel. As can be seen it was a very large room, with a fireplace, the roof was that of wooden beams, the walls were plain, and at the far end were 13 wooden steps, restored later into stone, leading to an upper part where the Figlie performed, behind an iron grille, as they did in Church.

At the far end, the apartments of the Priora can be seen, where the balcony is situated.

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This is the internal courtyard of the Pietà, which in Vivaldi's day was cloistered, on the bottom left of the grey building is where the chapel was situated, the music room is on the left.

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Let us now turn our thoughts to Vivaldi himself, and put him into context of the Pietà. Vivaldi first went to the Pietà as Maestro di Violin in 1703, he started work on Saturday 1st September, and had a 38 year association with this Ospedale. He had been ordained to the Priesthood in March of the same year, and was given what is known as a "Mansionaria", which is the duty of saying a specified number of Masses for the soul of a woman named Lugrezia Molin Memo, who in her will, stated that she left 2500 ducats for Masses to be said at the "Altare Privileggiato" of the Church of the Pietà. For this he was paid 20 ducats every few months. It was this staircase that he would have climbed to reach the Music room. When he arrived he had to first present himself to the Priora, then she would call on of the Maestre, who would have been one of the older Musicians, to accompany him to his lesson, this was the custom for all the Masters teaching at the Pietà.

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Vivaldi was paid 15 ducats every 3 months, this payment for 27th June 1704, is for 6 months work.

27 @ D.Ant.o Vivaldi Mro di Violin per mesi sei, et @ conto 30 D

Later in the same year his pay was increased to 100 annually to include the teaching of the "Viola all'Inglese", the Viol.

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He not only taught but it was also his duty to acquire instruments for the Figlie di Coro, where and when necessary, he would later be re-reimbursed by the Pietà. Here he buys 2 violins.

Detto (19th July 1712) per spese di Chiesa , e Coro a D. Ant.o Vivaldi per saldo di due Violini uno serve per Anna Maria 20 L'altro per Bernardina 12 n.268.

These were 2 of his pupils, but what is interesting about this payment is the price he pays for the 2 instruments destined for Anna Maria & Bernardina. Anna Maria is the Figlia for whom he wrote 37 Violin Concertos, and 2 for Viola d'Amore, she was an exceptional musician, and already when she was 16, he could see her exceptional talent, whereas Bernardina's cost on 12, which is average.

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The Figlie della Pietà both those of the Coro as those of Comun had no surnames, but instead were known by the names of their instruments, for the musicians and for the Figlie di Comun by the nature of the work they did.

In this document of 1707, we have a list, which illustrates this.

Lucieta Organista	Soprana dal Contralto
Paulina dal Tenor	Lorenza dalla Viola
Stella dalla Tiorba	Michielina dal Violin
Maria dalla Viola	Meneghina dalla Viola
Aneta dal Sopran	Clementia dalla Viola
Diana dal Contralto	Susana dal Violin
Prudenza dal Contralto	Cattina dalla Violeta
Cecilia dal Contralto	Vittoria dal Tenor
Silvia dal Violin	Antonia dal Tenor
Angelica dal Violin	Oliva dal Sopran
Catterina dal Violon	Pasqueta dal Sopran
Rosana Organista	Anastasia dal Sopran
Giulia Organista	
Geltruda dalla Violeta	
Agostina dal Sopran	
Anneta dal Basso	
Clementia dal Violin	

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1714 marked the turning point for the music of Vivaldi. In that year the Maestro di Coro Francesco Gasparini, asked the Governors of the Pietà for 6 months leave of absence from his duties, for family reasons. The Governors agreed, and that he took up his duties once again after that time. On the same day, that he asked his permission, he withdrew all his money from the Pietà, not intending to return, but this was unknown to the Governors. After the 6 months was up, and Gasparini had not returned, they found themselves in a difficult situation, so they turned to Vivaldi for help, and asked him to be Maestro di Coro, but he refused, as Vivaldi did not want a permanent job, and be tied down, but a compromise was reached. Vivaldi would stand in until another Maestro di Coro was found, the Governors offered him more money, and so everyone was satisfied. It was during this period that Vivaldi had to compose Sacred Music for the Church, and so began his first great period of this Music.

In 1715 he was paid an extra 50 ducats for a Mass, Vespers, more than 30 motets, a sacred Oratorio and other compositions. The following year had the unique title created for him on his own approval of Maestro dei Concerti.

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From the Vacchette which are the daily cash books, is the payment for these works, which includes the Gloria.

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The first existing piece of music that we have of Vivaldi, is this Sonata written for Oboe, Violin, Organ and Salmoè, a small reed instrument, resembling a small clarinet. On the Manuscript Vivaldi has written the names of the Figlie for whom he wrote it. This was a rule, and was very practical, so that firstly he and the 2 Maestre di Coro kept a record of it and second there would be no quarrels as to who played what.

The musicians for whom Vivaldi wrote this Sonata, were:

Signora Prudenza Violin

Signora Pelegrina Oboè

Signora Lucietta Organo

Signora Candida Salmoè se piace

Photograph by Micky White © Property of Micky White.

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Prudenza was known as Prudenza dal Contralto, but these girls were so versatile, that they could sing or play, she was the natural daughter of noble man Marco Dandolo, this shows in the way she was dressed, with lace and a small bonnet, and a medal of an Agnus Deo the Lamb of God, tied with a off white ribbon. Prudenza had a very strong character, she married when she was 28, to one of the Governors of the Pietà, who was 74, she died at the age of 91. she also played the spinette and the Viola all'Inglese. Once married they took no further part in the life of the Pietà, in fact were not allowed to, as they were married women, and had sexual experiences. The Governors of the Pietà were very strict about the morality of all Figlie of the Pietà, those who remained at the Pietà were all Virgins, if there was any relationship outside marriage, the Pietà saw to it that the man married the girl immediately, and was never allowed back for any reason.

Photograph by Micky White ©

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Pelegrina's origins are exactly the opposite, she was just wrapped in rags. She was probably born as a result of Prostitution, as there is no care of her dress, or the family was poverty stricken, but this does not seem likely as even the poorest family, took some care. She could have been brought from outside Venice, as she has been placed at the Pietà at 8 days old. Pelegrina played the Violone, the Violin and the Oboe, but she was not only a musician, she was also a nurse and a chemist. It was her duty to take care of the sick, provide the medicines and any special diet they required.

There musical life began, when they returned to the Pietà, from being looked after by the families of the wet nurses in Venice or in the Country. When Pelegrina returned she was put under the care of Cattarina dal Violon, who would bring her up like a mother, she would teach Pelegrina how to read and write, she also taught her Arithmetic and of course Christian Doctrine. But it was her musical influence, that brought Pelegrina her life into the Coro, she was first taught the Violon, as Cattarina was known as Cattarina dal Violon, she later learn the Violin and then the Oboe. She was a pupil of Vivaldi for 38 years. she was playing the violin until her death at the age of 76.

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Pelegrina had to cheque all the medicines which were ordered by the Doctor. This list is written in her own hand.

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Lucietta's entry in the scaffetta is impossible to identify, as there are 2 in the same year named Lucietta, and without the scaffetta No, she cannot be positively identified. So I have used her death certificate.

She died of Mal di Petto, aged 82, and was ill for 11 days.

Lucietta reached the top at the life of the Pietà, she became "Scrivana", and is noted as such in the certificate, but in 1730 she also became Priora, but after 6 years had to retire, due to blindness in both eyes.

But these woman did not wallow in their sorrows, and she continued to have “Figlie in Educazione”. Sometimes these children were as young as 2 years old.
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This is a list made by the Pietà on the 24th May 1718, it was a kind of census, every member of the Institution is listed, headed by the Maestre and Figlie di Choro.

I have transcribed the list, and added their ages for the year of 1715, the year when Vivaldi was acting Maestro di Coro, including their year and date of death and the Instruments they played and the voice for the musicians, who both sang and played.

The relationship between Vivaldi and these woman, was very special, there was an energy between them that was electric, they recognised in him a musician and composer of exceptional quality, and he saw the same in them. But it is his sensitivity that is remarkakable, which show in his writing for them. They all had the same beginnings, they were all unwanted and abandoned, which in a situation such as this, made them more emotionally vulnerable and sensitive, and Vivaldi had understood this, and adapted his music accordingly. In the sonata above mentioned, in the first few bars, first Pelegrina comes in with the Oboe, then Prudenza and then Lucieta, but they are given EQUAL importance and time. This shows also in his Concertos for Molti Strumenti, they are all stars.

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FIGLE DI CORO 1715

NAME & AGE IN 1715	INSTRUMENT / VOICE POSITION HELD	YEAR OF BIRTH	DATE	DATE OF DEATH	AGE AT DEATH
MENEGHINA 56	VIOLIN PRIORA	1659	22 FEBRUARY	27 JANUARY 1730	71
MARCOLINA 66	VIOLIN / VIOLONE MAESTRA DI CHORO	1649		5 MARCH 1730	81
BASTIANA 63	VIOLIN	1652		19 AUGUST 1724	72
STELLA 67	ORGAN	1648		27 JANUARY 1732	82
ANZOLETA 72	VIOLIN	1643		7 FEBRUARY 1721	77
SILVIA 65	SOPRANO	1650		3 MARCH 1725	75
ZANETTA 49	SINGER / DISPENSIERA	1666		8 AUGUST 1722	56
ANDRIANA 52	TIORBA / VIOLIN / SAGRESTANA	1663		17 FEB 1734	70
ANGELICA 59	VIOLIN DISPENSIERA / SOPRA LAVORI D'AGO	1656	13 SEPTEMBER	2 JULY 1727	71
ORTENSIA 63	CELLO	1652	21 OCTOBER	26 FEBUARY 1730	78
LUCIETA 38	ORGAN SINGER CELLO SCRIVANA / PRIORA	1675		4 MARCH 1757	82
LUGREZIA 51	CONTRALTO TENOR SCRIVANA	1664		21 DECEMBER 1736	72
PAULINA 60	CELLO SACRESTANA DI FUORI PORTINARA	1655		22 OCTOBER 1740	85
ANTONIA 44	TENOR	1671		10 DEC 1733	62
MICHELINA 41	VIOLIN MAESTRA DI CHORO	1674		17 DECEMBER 1736	62
ROSANA 49	VIOLIN SACRESTANA DI FUORI	1666		8 MAY 1746	80
BARBARA 46	SOPRANO	1669		22 FEBRUARY 1758	88
MARTA 58	CELLO / TIORBA	1657		1 SEPTEMBER 1735	78
MADALENA 52	CONTRALTO	1663		30 OCTOBER 1748	85
PELLEGRINA 37	OBOE / VIOLONE / VIOLIN SPECIERA	1678	8 MAY	7 AUGUST 1754	76
LUGREZIA	VIOLIN	1691	5 JULY ?	27 DECEMBER 1775	84
MADALENA 37	VIOLIN	1678		31 DECEMBER 1738	60
MADALENA 36	SOPRANO	1677		1 JANUARY 1728	50
MARIA 48	CELLO	1667		18 JUNE 1737	70
STELLA 37	TIORBA	1678	7 AUGUST	28 JUNE 1763	85
CANDIDA 40	CELLO / SALMOÈ COPYIST	1675	17 NOVEMBER	26 MARCH 1757	82
PAULINA 43	TENOR	1672		20 MAY 1748	76
CECILIA 36	CONTRALTO	1679	1 NOVEMBER	28 MAY 1726	47
SILVIA 35	VIOLIN	1674	DECEMBER	13 FEBRUARY 1743	69
CATTARINA 42	VIOLIN	1673		10 NOVEMBER 1765	92
GELTRUDA 31	CONTRALTO / VIOLETTA / CELLO TIORBA SCRIVANA	1684	28 OCTOBER	19 JANUARY 1752	68
ROSANA 30	ORGAN	1685		28 SEPTEMBER 1759	74
GIULIA 28	ORGAN MAESTRA DI CORO	1687	29 JANUARY	19 OCTOBER 1763	77
AGOSTINA	SOPRANO	1671			
ANNA	BASSO	?	?	?	?
MICHELINA 46	ORGAN	1669		5 MAY 1737	68
MICHELINA 29	CONTRALTO	1686	29 SEPTEMBER	18 NOVEMBER 1766	80
CLEMENTIA 25	CELLO	1690	28 MARCH		

SOPRANA 43	CONTRALTO	1672		12 OCTOBER 1749	77
MENEGHINA 38	CELLO	1677	10 JULY	13 DECEMBER 1763	86
ANASTASIA 40	SOPRANO	1675	FEBRUARY	14 MAY 1753	77
SUSANA 27	VIOLIN	1688	17 AUGUST	MARRIED 1730	
ANNA MARIA 19	VIOLIN, OBOE, TIORBA, HARPSICHORD, VIOLA D'AMORE, CELLO, MANDOLIN	1696	31 JULY-FEB 1697	10 AUGUST 1782	86
APPOLONIA 23	SOPRANO	1692	9 FEBRUARY	11 NOVEMBER 1751	60
CLEMENZA 33	VIOLIN	1682	23 NOVEMBER	29 DECEMBER 1768	86
LORENZA 22	CELLO	1691	27 OCTOBER	26 JUNE 1756	65
CATTINA	VIOLA/ VIOLONE	1687		5 FEBRUARY 1770	82
DIANORA 21	SINGER	1694	21 APRIL	MARRIED 27 OCTOBER 1726	
ANETA 62	SOPRANO	1653	29 DECEMBER	30 DEC 1730	77
ANTONIA	TENOR				
OLIVIA			DIED BEFORE 1807	OR MARRIED	
PASQUETTA 25	SOPRANO AGIUSTA LE SPINETTE	1690	12 JULY	25 DECEMBER 1767	77
VITTORIA 32	TENOR	1683	17 APRIL	5 JUNE 1764	81
ISABELLA 23	SINGER	1692	14 JULY	30 JUNE 1739	45
BERNARDINA 18	VIOLIN	1697		23 NOVEMBER 1783	86
FIORINA 13	VIOLIN	1702		APRIL 1728	26
ANTONIA 12	ORGAN	1703		MARRIED 14 APRIL 1755	52
BASTIANA 16	VIOLIN, CELLO	1699		5 DECEMBER 1774	75
PERPETUA	VIOLIN, VIOLA, VIOLONE	1707		27 JANUARY 1793	85
BASILIA 14	SINGER / VIOLA	1701		3 FEBRUARY 1780	77

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