ANTONIO VIVALDI
Gloria in D major, R. 589
Born: March 4, 1678, in Venice
Died: July 28, 1741, in Vienna
Work composed: ca. 1713–1719

Antonio Vivaldi spent most of his productive years as a lay priest at the Musical Seminary of the Hospital of Mercy in Venice, a home and school for illegitimate or orphaned girls. His duties covered all musical bases from teaching a variety of instruments, to composing and serving as superintendent of music. In the almost four decades (1704–1740) at the Seminary, Vivaldi wrote enormous quantities of music, availing himself of the services of his well-trained students, using these resources to explore all manner of instrumental effects.

During his lifetime, Vivaldi was highly esteemed throughout Europe, though more for his operas and choral works than for his concertos. Only within the past decade or so have pioneering souls begun to perform and record his colorful operas and explore more fully his choral and other vocal works. One choral piece that has enjoyed wide currency predating the current generation’s “rediscovery” of such music is the Gloria in D major, R. 589. The manuscript actually turned up in the 1920s along with a number of other works, including a Gloria in D major (R. 588) that has not achieved the same degree of popularity as the one we hear tonight.

The Gloria text is a hymn of joy, praise and worship long connected with the Roman Catholic Mass. Vivaldi’s writing, generally simpler and less sumptuously contrapuntal than his great German counterpart and admirer, J.S. Bach, is marked by dramatic contrasts in mood, texture and instrumental color. It conveys a sense of immediacy and rhythmic fervor that seem to reflect the extraordinary speed with which he composed. He claimed that he could compose faster than his copyists could simply copy what he wrote.

The opening movement, Gloria in excelsis, launches this 12-section work with octave leaps and repeated notes that establish the triumphant key of D major and create a sense of ceremonial grandeur and boundless energy. Punctuating trumpets and oboes reinforce the declamatory outbursts from the chorus and rhythmic momentum.

Et in terra pax is as private and meditative as the opening Gloria is exuberant, and finds Vivaldi using chromatic harmony to heighten expression. The Laudamus te is joy incarnate, positing a repeated instrumental refrain sandwiched between the vocal sections. The ensuing Gratias agimus tibi is but six bars in length but solemnly evokes praise to God through chordal movement. Cast in the same key as the Gratias, the Propter magnam gloriam showcases Vivaldi’s adept contrapuntal writing to illuminate a further aspect of God’s glory.

Balanced against a lovely instrumental tune, the seamless soprano solo Domine Deus expresses the gentle and tender side of the Almighty. The succeeding Domine Fili Unigenite is animated by dotted rhythms. Reverting again to the minor mode, the Domine Deus, Agnus Dei pits the descending alto soloist’s line with chord-based commentary from the chorus and orchestra. Qui tollis, also in the minor, combines expressive chromaticism with rhythmic urgency. Though quickly paced, the Qui sedes ad dexteram continues the essentially serious mood of the
preceding two movements as the strings accompany the alto soloists.

*Quoniam tu solus sanctus* marks a return to the D-major optimism of the opening movement and leads into the double-fugue that ends the work in a most celebratory fashion.

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