

*Program Notes*  
**Music And Mystery, A Unique Concert Event**  
by Gerald Elias

## **Two Masters of the Italian Baroque: Antonio Vivaldi and Pietro Castrucci**

**W**ithin a year of each other, two babies were born, one in Venice and the other 300 miles south in Rome. Both boys received their initial training from fathers who were professional violinists. Both eventually would have illustrious careers, achieving international renown for their virtuosity. Both would die penniless in foreign lands. Other than those facts, their life's paths were highly divergent.

Though Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) demonstrated considerable ability as a young violinist, he became an ordained Catholic priest while in his twenties. He generally was uninvolved with liturgical functions, but his connection to the church helped obtain decades-long employment at Venice's Ospedale della Pietà, a remarkable convent-orphanage-school-conservatory whose famous all-female orchestra was recognized as one of the finest instrumental ensembles in Europe. It was at the Ospedale where Vivaldi taught, performed, and composed hundreds of instrumental and vocal works.

Pietro Castrucci (1679-1752) was a protégé of the Roman god of the Italian Baroque, Arcangelo Corelli. Like Vivaldi, Castrucci showed early promise and, as a young man, was recruited to become orchestra concertmaster of London's newly founded Royal Academy of Music, an institution created by local aristocrats for the lofty purpose of producing Italian opera, specifically those composed and conducted by George Frideric Handel. Castrucci retained his position in the orchestra for twenty years, establishing himself as one of the premier virtuosos in one of Europe's great cultural centers.

Vivaldi composed well over a thousand works, including dozens of operas and hundreds of concertos. Many of them, like his beloved Four Seasons and his Concerto for Four Violins, are masterpieces that have found a home in today's standard repertoire.

In contrast, Castrucci, though greatly admired as a performer, composed very little. Two opuses of violin sonatas, one of concerti grossi, and a joint opus with Francesco Geminiani of sonatas for flute, are the extent of his known works. It's a mystery why he didn't compose more. His music is on a par with the best composers of era and has a uniquely individual voice, so individual that the music historian, Charles Burney, claimed that Castrucci "was long thought insane ... his compositions were too mad for his own age." Was it a lack of opportunity that he composed so little? Was his orchestra job too taxing? Was he simply not interested? We will probably never know.

What we do know is that, with diminished skills, Castrucci left his orchestra position in 1837 but continued to perform on his own. In 1750 he moved from London to Dublin. As his health declined, he performed less frequently and died in extreme poverty. Nevertheless, as a gesture of the value placed upon his contributions to the music world, he was given an ostentatious funeral with music that had been composed by his former boss, Handel. After his death, memories of Castrucci and his music faded quickly into obscurity. The first complete recording, ever, of Castrucci's amazing 12 Opus 1 sonatas, published in 1718, was only released in 2021 on Centaur Records with Elias performing.

By 1740, Vivaldi's music, long the rage in Venice, had outlived its novelty. He departed for Vienna, hoping to resurrect his both his musical and financial fortunes, perhaps seeking patronage from Emperor Charles VI. Tragically for Vivaldi, Charles died shortly after the composer arrived in Vienna. Left with no resources and in poor health, in 1741 Vivaldi died destitute. Unlike Castrucci's grand funeral, Vivaldi's death was hardly noticed. He was forgotten for almost two hundred years, only to be rediscovered in the 20th century. There are few composers whose music is more popular than Vivaldi's.

On October 23, theorbo player Gus Denhard will join violinist Gerald Elias to celebrate the genius of Vivaldi and Castrucci in a program of three virtuoso violin sonatas by each composer. A special feature of the program will be Elias discussing how Vivaldi's iconic Four Seasons informed and inspired the writing of his mystery novels.