

“VIVALDI, EUPHORIA SET TO MUSIC” BY HERVÉ NIQUET

This project reflects my longstanding interest in music for equal voices and revives a liturgical practice that was common throughout Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. We know, of course, that women were excluded from performing music in the churches, but in Italy and France, as in other countries, there were convents of women as well as of men, and these convents engaged in exactly the same musical practices. Composers therefore mastered the art of writing for the rather strange but extremely moving vocal spectrum of an ensemble made up exclusively of female voices. They produced an entire body of work which nowadays tends to be watered down somewhat – and that is a real shame.

In France, there were composers such as Pierre Bouteiller and Louis Le Prince, for example, whose work *Le Concert Spirituel* has performed widely in recent years. But of course the best known master of this repertoire remains Antonio Vivaldi, by virtue of his position at the Ospedale della Pietà in Venice – which was both a convent and a girls' orphanage. I find it astonishing that Vivaldi's choral works are not performed more often with equal voices, since there is no particular difficulty in combining two women's choirs. In the *Gloria* there is no male solo, and hence such an arrangement is perfectly feasible. As regards the arias written for female voices, one can of course draw upon soloists, but it is equally possible to have those parts sung by the choir, that is, with the entire soprano section singing the soprano solos, and all the altos singing the alto solos, as was very frequently done in Vivaldi's day. This approach produces an exceptional intensity and lends the music a certain operatic effect. And Vivaldi's works, like all religious music of that period, are fundamentally theatrical in nature.

Performing Vivaldi is absolutely exhilarating: everyone must be in top form, throwing all their strength into the battle and, as a result, the music releases a wild energy. But that is not all: this genius priest and educator succeeds in producing the sweetest possible sound one moment, followed by a thundering passage and, just when we think we have reached the summit, an even more explosive choral sequence, followed immediately by an ineffable tenderness sung by two voices, and so on. There is never a dull moment – each melody is singularly captivating. Vivaldi's music is incredibly difficult to perform, since it demands great virtuosity in terms of both intonation and agility. Taking it on is a bit like attending a yoga class: sometimes you are reluctant to go, but in the end, you feel enveloped in the greatest jubilation. Even after studying his music for several decades, I admit that I never tire of it.