

“IN MUSIC, THERE CAN BE NO TABOOS”



With his new album Avi Avital lays bare the soul of Vivaldi's music – and tests the limits of classical interpretation.

The mandolin is more than just a musical instrument for Avi Avital – it's the means with which he conquers continents, eras and cultural worlds. Regardless of the composition he is exploring, Avital constantly pushes the envelope of a work's aural possibilities. In his efforts to expand the mandolin's range of interpretation, he tirelessly melds its modern and historical roles.

With his recent recordings – such as his reworking of Bach – this approach has sent shockwaves through the classical world. Bach purists and mandolin experts were astonished both by the vitality Avital displayed and by the artistic license he had taken. In his new album he goes back to his instrument's origins, time-travelling into the Venetian Baroque of Antonio Vivaldi. With this composer, too, his approach to the works goes against the grain: inspirational, temperamental, individual. Avital sees Vivaldi's mandolin concertos as “the Old Testament of my instrument”. He aimed to capture the spirit of Venice while re-examining the musical genius of Antonio Vivaldi. “What was so exciting about that period”, says Avital, “was the tremendous freedom it gave musicians. Ultimately it's about finding the personal groove in these works and, in the process, making Vivaldi – whose music everyone knows – distinctively my own.”

The result is an album which upends our comfortable preconception of Vivaldi, not least because the mandolinist remains unabashedly true to his motto: “In music, there can be no taboos.”

Granted, Avi Avital isn't the first musician to recognize Vivaldi as a Baroque rocker, a pop star of his time; a composer whose top priority was to thrill his audience. But seldom has the bridge from the past to present been so compellingly constructed: “The rehearsals for this recording often reminded me of my time in a rock band in high school,” says Avital. “Even in rock it's ultimately about finding an infectious groove, generating a mood and coming up with a concept. It's similar with Vivaldi. We have the melody and the bass line – the challenges come in deciding when to use which instrument, how to define the rhythms and produce the actual sound.”

“At that time, music was a matter of boldness,” the artist declares, “of showing personality and spontaneity.” And it is precisely those attributes which define his approach to Vivaldi. Avital, well-schooled in the music's history, opts for dynamic contrasts and brisk tempo combinations. His perfectly articulated musicianship allows him the freedom to play particular notes at their tonal limit, at times using techniques that we more often associate with jazz. In each of his interpretations he pushes the mandolin beyond our expectations, capturing the spirit of the Baroque era's delight in experimentation, while imbuing the music with modern immediacy. With his masterful technique and his historical and emotional approach to the Baroque music of Vivaldi, Avital sometimes even challenges contemporary recording technology.

“We often associate Vivaldi with pomp and powdered wigs,” says the mandolinist, “but in truth he was an exceptionally imaginative minimalist. If you gave Bach and him the same musical materials, Bach's piece would have lasted seven minutes, Vivaldi's only four. Vivaldi goes straight to the heart of the message; he is a master of directness – with an inspiration for distillation.” Avital also finds the composer's genius at work in his brazenness. He sees the “Red Priest” of Venice as the creator not only of the *Four Seasons* but also of Baroque beat music. The mandolin is a time machine for Avital, an instrument with which he

is constantly travelling between the past and the present. When he plays Vivaldi, the mandolin master lets us hear that the Venetian composer can actually be our contemporary: an agitator, a rhythm enthusiast and a crossover artist! Avi Avital shows us a new yet authentic Antonio Vivaldi.

In the great Mandolin Concerto in C major and the D major Concerto for Lute, but also in the C major Trio Sonata for Violin and Lute, Avital is tackling fundamentally simple compositions which only begin to come alive through interpretation. “The Mandolin Concerto is a constant provocation and a challenge to our expectations,” says Avital. “You can see the fun that Vivaldi had when he got the whole orchestra to play *pizzicato* in imitation of the solo instrument – basically the entire orchestra is turned into a mandolin. This is an idea that speaks volumes for Vivaldi’s sense of fantasy, his inspiration and the richness of his invention.” Along with the delicate mandolin melody, in Avital’s interpretation we hear scrunching strings, then suddenly an organ emerges and the harmonies take on ghostly shadows, and then the piece reverts again to almost naïve ideas. Avital is always seeking, high and low, for new provocations and stimuli for the listener – for new and dynamic starting points.

One reason Vivaldi turned to the mandolin may have been to flatter his patron, Guido Bentivoglio, a marquis from Ferrara who played the instrument. Vivaldi wrote two pieces for the mandolin, though in the orchestras of his time mandolinists were certainly not a fixture. The instrument’s real home was the salons of the aristocracy, and Vivaldi’s real love was for the violin. “Transcribing the violin part for mandolin is an exciting experiment – perhaps because one can also be bolder in the interpretation than a violin virtuoso would be.” Avital takes on the Concerto in A minor, one of the composer’s most popular pieces, which many violin pupils learn to play after three or four years: “The exciting thing is that everybody has this melody in their head. What I’ve tried to do is, to see what happens when you re-interpret it with my instrument.”

Equally impressive is Avital’s arrangement of “Summer” from the *Four Seasons*. It’s a spectacle of turbulence; an escalating hurricane: “Vivaldi’s ‘Summer’ is bipolar,” says Avital, “sometimes even frightening.” And indeed, when he plays this piece, it sounds less like a shepherd seeking shelter from the rain under a tree than a panopticon of nature’s power and the almightiness of God. “This is exactly what Vivaldi called for in the poem which prefaces the ‘Summer’ concerto,” Avital explains. The mandolinist is not afraid to wipe away the quietly bourgeois façade of the “global classic hit” – thus displacing one of the Baroque’s greatest myths and re-energizing the pulse of the *Four Seasons*. His arrangement is perhaps the most compelling proof of Antonio Vivaldi’s timeless modernity.

Avi Avital doesn’t merely interpret the Italian Baroque with his instrument, he embodies it. Vivaldi’s country has long been a second home to the mandolinist, who was born in Be’er Sheva, Israel. The bulk of his studies were at the Cesare Pollini Conservatory in Padua, where he matured amidst the Italian Baroque mentality. For his Vivaldi project he collaborated with the Venice Baroque Orchestra, which arguably plays the composer’s music more authentically than any other ensemble. “Playing with the Venice Baroque Orchestra is a great experience for me,” Avital enthuses. “It consists exclusively of musicians who live in Venice, speak its dialect, and are surrounded by this unique city’s culture. Their incredible knowledge of Venetian history can be heard in every note they play.”

The bonus tracks featuring gondoliers’ songs are especially important to Avital. “You hear what was being sung in the streets at the time: These are the songs of the ‘taxi drivers’, with their subversive, raw texts.” Avi Avital’s Vivaldi album is an acoustical and interpretative re-discovery of a familiar genius. Rarely has the “Red Priest” of Venice sounded so contemporary and temperamental – so gripping and free of taboos.

Axel Brüggemann