

Prologue



Turin, February 1929

‘Who in the name of heaven is Vivaldo?’ inquires Filippo Giordano, with slight impatience in his voice.

‘Vivaldi,’ corrects the man in a smart, perhaps slightly old-fashioned but still respectable tweed suit. He shifts rather uncomfortably on the chair that stands a shade too low before the impressive mahogany desk of Signore Giordano, adding, ‘Antonio Vivaldi was an extremely gifted Venetian composer who lived during the first half of the eighteenth century.’ He detects a spark of interest in the body language of the industrialist who had earlier declared himself to have only five minutes free to talk to Professor Alberto Gentili from the National Library of Turin.

Filippo takes a long pull on his cigarette and looks the musicologist attentively straight in the eye. He cannot remember ever having met the professor before, but he seems a pleasant enough fellow. Rather naively dressed, but then what would one expect of an academic?

‘How come then, Professor Gentili, that I have never heard of this VIVALDI?’ Filippo makes sure to pronounce the name correctly this time.

Alberto Gentili knows Filippo to be a lover of classical music. The professor has encountered Giordano and his wife often enough at the Opera House. Not that they know one another personally, for the Giordanos have their own box. A successful businessman and director of a factory, Filippo Giordano can afford the very best, whilst Gentili has to make do with a seat in the auditorium. Not that he minds. On the contrary! As musicologist Alberto most appreciates a performance from the position at which he can best hear the music. He is sometimes invited through his work to attend a performance from one of the galleries accommodating the

richly decorated private boxes. But then he finds himself irritated beyond measure by the behaviour of the people up there, more interested in the latest gossip or the quality of the champagne - always, of course, flowing copiously - than the performance itself. The Giordanos are an exception. Although he has never shared a box with them, he can usually observe them from whichever one he's in, and they are always listening astutely. The talk in the corridors is that they regularly host concerts in their sumptuous mansion far from the busy city centre of Turin, and that Signora Giordano in particular lends financial support to musicians whenever she can. Given all this, Professor Gentili cherishes high hopes of the present conversation. Clearing his throat softly, he takes a sip of water. He has politely declined the offer of coffee; over recent years it has given him heartburn.

He resumes his story, 'Well now, this Antonio Vivaldi has preoccupied me intensely over recent years. I will spare you the details, for you are a busy man. Suffice it to say I guarantee my words will be of interest to you!'

Filippo glances quickly at his watch, a stylishly designed Patek Philippe given him by his wife years before, and nods to Professor Gentili to proceed. The factory director plucks a cigarette in his customary manner from his silver cigarette case, then offers one to the professor.

'No, thank you. I don't smoke.'

Filippo frowns coldly, drawing together heavy eyebrows in which the first grey hairs are just becoming visible. He lights his cigarette, filling the room with the sharp aroma of Lebanese tobacco. With his first deep draw, fragile wreaths of smoke begin slowly to spiral up towards the high ceiling. Giordano leans back relaxed in his chair and gestures with his hand that Gentili recommence his story. 'No one would blame you for never having heard of this composer. The name Antonio Vivaldi is long lost in the mists of time. Today only one or two people are familiar with his name and some of his works. We still do not know exactly what and how much Vivaldi composed, but in recent years we have realised that his oeuvre must

have been extremely extensive.'

'How did you reach this conclusion?' interrupts Signore Giordano. There is already more interest in his voice than at the outset of their interview.

'Ah. Call it luck, call it God's will,' smiles the professor. 'It all began a couple of years ago, in the autumn of 1926 to be precise, when our library received a request to value a collection of manuscripts and books. It concerned a collection from an old monastery in Monferato; the order wanted to sell the documents to fund some renovation work. It immediately became clear that the collection was comprised for a great part of music, so it was of the greatest interest to me. I have in fact for years been searching for the lost music archives of the Court of Savoy Orchestra, once resident here in Turin. As you are probably aware, the Court of Savoy at one time withdrew to Sardinia so as to stay out of the hands of Napoleon. According to tradition, the music archive was too bulky to take with them and it was thus decided to hide it somewhere secure. This was so thoroughly achieved that the archive has, alas, never since been found. You may imagine how excited both the director of the library, Luigi Torri, and myself were about the collection now offered us. Might this be part of the Savoy archive? What I discovered were indeed all music compositions. Much work by another composer, Alessandro Stradella, but also fourteen volumes consisting of original work by Antonio Vivaldi. This last was most extraordinary, for all the manuscripts were original and annotated by Vivaldi himself. An absolute treasure-trove, and completely beyond the financial reach of our library. In the meanwhile there were other sharks in the ocean and we had to negotiate swiftly to ensure that the collection remained intact and did not become disseminated amongst hundreds of antique-dealers. That would only increase the risk of this music once more being lost, buried in the dark and dusty depths of private collections.'

'But what's so special about this collection, or about the music of Vivaldi?' Filippo once more breaks in upon the professor.

‘Ah, it is a pity you missed the concert last year in January. Then I wouldn’t have to use all these words. You’d have experienced for yourself what I mean.’

The manufacturer stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray, stands up and walks over to one of the high windows overlooking the valley; just visible in the distance is the spire of the *Mole Antonelliana* that for decades has dominated the centre of Turin. The chill February wind sends sheets of rain rattling against the panes. Filippo recalls all too well how about a year ago he and his wife fled the cold winter months for weeks aboard a luxurious cruise ship on the Nile. He remembers the languorous upstream voyaging, the slightly faster glide back downstream.

This had not been a flight merely from winter weather. It had also been to forget. To forget the joyful little voice of Renzo that had seemed always to fill every corner of the house. Renzo, their beautiful son; so mischievous and adventurous, and taken from them so cruelly. Their home is quiet these days, deathly quiet.

The fever had gone on too long and despite the best doctors having been called to his bedside still held the little boy in its murderous grip. Until the moment when his tiny body could hold out against it no longer and with a barely audible sigh, one almost of relief, relinquished its hold on all too short a life.

It was the most dramatic event of his life and Filippo had at the time not known, and still did not know, how to cope with his wife’s grief. A long holiday abroad had not had the desired effect. Once back, the house was as silent as ever and still forlornly haunted by bitter-sweet memories.

Filippo takes a deep breath and turns his back on the rain. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says, ‘I was away at the time. It seems I missed something quite special. Tell me, Professor Gentili, what sort of music did this Vivaldi compose?’

‘It might be a better to ask what sort not!’ retorts Alberto with a grin. ‘Church music, concertos, operas, you name it. And what is

more this man was an innovator, both in terms of composition and in the use of instruments.'

'Mm, interesting.' Filippo seats himself on the edge of his desk and elegantly helps himself once more from the silver case. Tapping his cigarette thoughtfully on his left hand, he looks for a moment as if he is considering the pros and cons of lighting it. 'Professor Gentili, I should like to come back to something you mentioned earlier. You said there were not enough funds available to your library for you to be able to purchase this collection. But may I deduce from the fact that a concert has taken place that you somehow managed to gather together enough resources to put on the table?'

'Yes and no,' responds Alberto, shifting himself into yet another position on the impossible chair. 'Thanks to the enormous financial support of the wealthy stockbroker Signore Foa, the library is now the rightful owner of this collection.'

'My congratulations!' offers Filippo with feeling. 'But what do you expect of me, and what is the real reason for this talk?' At this moment the door opens and Alberto Gentili instantly recognises the director's rather sombre secretary.

'Francesco?' Gentili exclaims out loud, his face expressing utter bemusement.

'Your next appointment has been waiting for some time,' Francesco announces in a monotone approximating a snarl. He looks disparagingly at Professor Gentili as though he were some sort of intruder in his sanctuary. Filippo quickly surveys the agenda, placed on his desk for him earlier this morning, just as every other day, by his secretary.

'Five more minutes, Francesco,' he orders, but the gloomy apparition is already nodding in assent, 'Of course.' Before closing the door soundlessly behind him he casts a final withering glance at the professor responsible for disrupting his diary.

'You heard, Professor, five more minutes. But my next appointment is someone from the government, and he can wait. How can I be of service to you?' Filippo has in the meantime resumed his formal place behind the desk. Professor Gentili attempts to shove his chair

nearer the desk, leaning across its leather-clad surface conspiringly. 'The collection is not complete,' he says, now almost in a whisper. 'Once we had begun making an inventory we quickly realised that this must represent only half of an enormous collection. You can imagine the hunt for the missing manuscripts will get underway the minute this becomes generally known. And, lastly, there are plenty of dealers around who were deeply disappointed when the whole of the present collection came into the possession of the library.'

Giordano nods in comprehension.

'We have been busy over recent years tracing the other half of the collection and, as you will understand, all this has to be done with the utmost discretion. That's why we have organised no more concerts, or put out any other sort of publicity connected with Vivaldi. He has to remain "buried" for a while longer.'

'And has your search borne any fruit?' asks Filippo attentively. He has by now too adopted Alberto's pose of mutual confidentiality.

'Oh yes it has, thank God! It was not easy, but absolutely worth all the effort. I have been able precisely to trace the other half of the collection, and now we have arrived at the point at which I must appeal to your charitable generosity.'

Sensing the direction the discussion is threatening to take, the manufacturer leans back in his chair, bringing to an abrupt end the atmosphere of intimacy established between the two gentlemen.

'The documents that will complete the collection are in private hands. It looked as though a purchase would prove impossible, but the owner is showing increasing signs of agreeing to a sale. However, it is the finances that are the problem. The library holds insufficient funds, and that goes for the local authorities too. Our director has even contacted central government, but it seems Mussolini has other priorities just now.'

'That's absolutely right,' replies Giordano with irritation. 'Look what happened last week. A pantomime treaty containing the so-called ratification of the Holy See, wherein Roman Catholicism is elevated to the status of national religion of Italy. Ha! Nothing but a

publicity-stunt on the part of Mussolini to increase his sphere of influence among the people. But what nobody realises is quite what a costly joke this is. In my view, Mussolini has bought the Pope, despite official declarations to the effect that the state wants to compensate the Vatican for all the church property we once appropriated.' He slams his fist down on the desk, concluding furiously, 'Stuff and nonsense!' Professor Gentili recoils in shock, particularly since Signore Giordano has risen to his feet, gesticulating threateningly with his right index finger in the air.

'The only thing Il Duce has assured himself of is Vatican support for his administration! Do you know, Professor, this country is slowly going down the drain like a lost traveller sinking in a quagmire? Everyone follows along behind Mussolini like sheep but not one of them sees as far as the end of their own nose. And I tell you it is industry - the thing this country should prize most highly of all - which has to pay for his 'administration'. You are about to ask me for money. But if 'our leader' carries on the way he is going I have to ask myself seriously how much more room there still is for 'charitable generosity', as you put it just now.'

Professor Gentili feels a first hint of concern. Politics have never interested him, but he knows the economic situation in the country is far from rosy and donations for cultural acquisition are low on the current list of priorities for industrialists. It is time to play his last card. The chair he has been occupying all this time has finally become too much for him and he gets to his feet. He can now look Signore Giordano straight in the eyes; the two men are of equal height, though Filippo is clearly more heavily built.

'I don't think we need worry Signore Giordano. Politicians come and go like leaves on the trees. History has taught us that. It should not surprise me if twenty-five years from now Mussolini were long forgotten. But who will certainly not be forgotten...' the professor pauses significantly...

'Ha!' interrupts Giordano with a laugh, 'Antonio Vivaldi!'

But the professor is not laughing; indeed, his expression is grave as he replies in a quiet voice, 'Vivaldi, yes, possibly. But also Renzo

Giordano!

The director stares back at him half-stunned. At his right eye he feels the involuntary tic that always comes when he is under pressure.

‘What did you say?’ he asks in amazement.

‘I named your deceased son, and the possibility of making Renzo immortal. I know for certain that this way you would be doing your wife a great service and an honour.’

‘But I don’t understand what you mean,’ stammers Filippo.

‘Signore Giordano, this collection, this music carries the potential once more to conquer the world. Your name and that of your son will thus never more be forgotten; they will be synonymous with that of this great composer.’

It looks for a moment as if Giordano can glimpse the future, for he smiles fleetingly at this alluring idea. But then he shakes his head.

‘Nonsense, Professor. No one would take on such a proposal.’

‘There is a precedent,’ Professor Gentili volleys back at him. ‘The first half of the collection is in fact financed by Roberto Foa in memory of his son Mauro, who died very young.’

‘I see that you have done your homework, Professor.’

Gentili continues unperturbed. His arms thrown wide in an all-embracing gesture, he declaims, “The Mauro Foa and Renzo Giordano Collection”. That is how our library will designate the collection. What is more, a suitable vignette will be designed for the new bindings, incorporating an image of your son. *In Memoria Di Renzo Giordano I Genitori.*’

The professor folds his arms, giving the other man the chance to respond. Deep furrows darken Filippo’s forehead as he gazes at the photograph of his son, standing in its heavy silver frame upon his desk.

‘What sort of sum are we talking about?’ Giordano breaks the silence.

Professor Gentili raises his shoulders. ‘We are still in negotiations, Signore, but what interests me right now is whether or not you agree to the idea.’

Francesco has meanwhile appeared in the doorway again. Filippo walks up to the professor and grasps his hand. Already gently shaking hands goodbye, he draws him towards the door, thanking him for their discussion.

Just short of the doorway, Filippo stops them both.

‘I would like to invite you to spend the weekend at our summer-house,’ he says. ‘My wife would enjoy meeting you and I am quite sure she will be interested in what you have to say.’ He turns to his secretary, ‘Francesco! Ensure that transport is arranged for the professor, and send in my next appointment in a minute or so.’ Giordano again shakes the professor by the hand, heartily this time. Then shuts the door behind him and turns back to his desk.

The professor takes his coat and hat from the still hostile-looking Francesco, who informs him coolly that his taxi is waiting below. As he swiftly descends the marble staircase, Alberto Gentili wonders whether or not he should rejoicing. Will Giordano be prepared to unite the two halves of the collection and so preserve it?

Filippo Giordano stares transfixed at the photograph of his son. Might this be a way, after all, to soften his wife’s grief a little? He has little time to think about it, for Francesco ushers in the government representative. Giordano takes an immediate dislike to this stunted, balding figure: a stereotype of the classical accountant. In unpleasantly sour little voice and without deviating for a moment from his mission, the man announces that the majority of revenue profits from Giordano’s business are to be reserved for the new and self-evidently promising plans of Il Duce. It is naturally a great honour for this factory to be allowed to make such a contribution.

Hands behind his back, Filippo stands at the window watching the professor’s departing taxi. The monotonous drivel emanating from the government representative barely reaches his consciousness. Filippo smiles to himself. ‘The time has come,’ he muses, ‘to allow Antonio Vivaldi to return to life. In glory and in commemoration of my son, Renzo Giordano!’