

Vivaldi opera gets premiere in Ferrara nearly 300 years late

by [Nicole Winfield](#) in the [January 26, 2022](#) issue



Singers perform in Antonio Vivaldi's *Il Farnace* in Ferrara, Italy, on December 29, 2021. (Marco Caselli Nirma/Fondazione Teatro Comunale di Ferrara via AP)

The Catholic Church and the northern Italian city of Ferrara made their peace with Antonio Vivaldi on December 30, 2021—nearly 300 years after the city’s archbishop effectively canceled the staging of one of his operas, sending the famed Baroque composer into debt for his final years of life.

Ferrara archbishop Gian Carlo Perego attended the ceremony opening Vivaldi’s *Il Farnace* at the city’s public theater, a decision hailed by the theater’s artistic director as a “marvelous gesture” that helps heal the past and highlight one of Vivaldi’s lesser-known works.

“We want to restore to Vivaldi what was taken from him here in Ferrara,” Marcello Corvino said ahead of the premiere of *Il Farnace*, which tells the story of the tragic dynasty of King Pharnaces II.

According to historians, in the late 1730s, Ferrara cardinal Tommaso Ruffo banned Vivaldi from the city because Vivaldi, an ordained Catholic priest, had stopped celebrating mass and was rumored to be in a romantic relationship with one of his singers, Anna Girò. The decision effectively meant the cancellation of the scheduled 1739 Carnival production of *Il Farnace*, which had already enjoyed success in Italy and beyond.

In reality, Vivaldi’s reason for not celebrating mass was that he had long suffered from respiratory problems, and his relationship with Girò was professional and creative in nature, though Girò did also serve as something of a nursemaid to the sickly composer.

The cancellation proved financially disastrous for Vivaldi, Corvino said, since he had paid for the production himself ahead of time and was already experiencing a period of decline as his instrumental works had fallen out of favor.

Vivaldi went into debt, and he died in Vienna in 1741. Only after his manuscripts were rediscovered did he earn posthumous fame for *The Four Seasons* and other concertos.

Massimo Faggioli, a Ferrara-born church historian and theologian, said that Vivaldi, like other artists of his era, had enjoyed much more artistic freedom in his native Venice than in places like Ferrara, which had been part of the papal states and under the authority of the pope.

“Vivaldi got away with a lot of things in his life, but at a certain point he couldn’t avoid the Vatican-controlled or church-controlled culture,” Faggioli said.

Federico Maria Sardelli, a Vivaldi expert who is conducting the opera, said that after Cardinal Ruffo prohibited the Venetian composer from entering Ferrara, Vivaldi initially tried to score the production from afar. He wrote down explicit stage directions as well as expressive and interpretative notations that he normally would have given his singers in person.

Those notations remain in the manuscript prepared for the Ferrara production, which was never staged. They provided guidance for the new production, which ran for two nights, Sardelli said.

“We have this treasure, this score, which is a mirror of Vivaldi’s process,” he said. “He wrote incredible things that no Baroque composer ever wrote in a score because they would say it in person. We have the fortune of having the voice of Vivaldi written down on this score.”

At a conference before the premiere, Sardelli gave the current Ferrara archbishop, Perego, a bound copy of the score.

“With this gesture, we want to heal a fracture that needed to be healed,” Sardelli said.

Perego, for his part, accepted the score and admitted that Cardinal Ruffo had taken a position against Vivaldi that was based on rumor rather than fact. He noted that even Vivaldi’s parish priest had attested to the “morality” of the priest-composer in a letter to Ruffo and that Girò was known to be a woman of “virtue and faith.”

While insisting Ruffo had merely sought to promote “public morality,” Perego said the lesson of Vivaldi, *Il Farnace*, and Ferrara is a point that Pope Francis often makes: “The tongue kills more than the sword.” —Associated Press