

***The Four Seasons* for Violin and Orchestra, Op. 8, Nos. 1-4**

ANTONIO VIVALDI

B: March 4, 1678, Venice

D: July 28, 1741, Vienna

*The four violin concertos known collectively as *The Four Seasons* were published by Le Cene in Amsterdam in 1725, along with eight other concertos, under the title *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* (*The Contest of Harmony and Invention*). According to the composer's preface, the individual concertos, perhaps in different form, had become well known before publication.*

Scored for solo violin, strings and continuo (approx 39 minutes).

Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* may well qualify as the best-known instrumental work of the Baroque period. In addition to numerous recordings (more than sixty at latest count), these four concertos have served as the basis for ballets, for the score of a film of the same name, and in bits and pieces, for television commercials.

This popularity is not new found. In the eighteenth century too, the concertos were performed both “straight” and in arrangements that rival in ingenuity (or perversity) any to be heard today. In 1739, Nicolas Chedeville applied for a license to publish several Italian works for “the musette, the hurdy-gurdy, or the flute with the accompaniment of violins and a bass.” At the top of his list was the Spring concerto from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* - already the most popular of the set. Miichel Corrette used the same concerto as a basis for a grand motet, and Jean Jacques Rousseau arranged it for solo flute.

What was it that so stirred the listeners of Vivaldi's time? For the most part, the composer's accuracy in portraying natural sounds; unlike today, when composers feel obliged to apologize for imitative music, the goal then was to create as realistic a copy as possible. Indeed, the few criticisms leveled against *The Four Seasons* in the 18th century are directed against a supposed lack of realism.

Today, we appreciate the *Seasons* as heirs of the anti-pictorialism of the early 20th century (even the so-called “New Romanticism” has not embraced program music to any degree). Modern scholars are at pains to point out the appropriateness of Vivaldi's title for the entire Opus 8 set, in which armonia (in other words, traditional form) is reconciled with invenzione (in this case, pictorialism). Undeniably, Vivaldi does just that, retaining the traditional ritornello scheme, but making the solo episodes occasions both for virtuoso display and for scene painting. Others before him had indulged in passages of such imitation, but the *Seasons* is the most sustained programmatic work before Beethoven's “Pastoral” Symphony.

One of the attractions of the printed set, as against the manuscript versions that circulated before, was apparently the inclusion of verses accompanying each concerto, to make the programmatic content more explicit. Some of these are also marked in the score, in addition to some indications of scene and performing practice best left to the players' scrutiny.

The translated poems follow:

Spring

Joyful spring has arrived

The birds welcome it with their happy songs

And the brooks in the gentle breezes
Flow with a sweet murmur.

The sky is covered with a black mantle,
Thunder and lightning announce a storm.
When they are silent, the birds
Take up again their harmonious songs.

And in the flower-rich meadow,
To the gentle murmur of leaves and plants
The goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog at his side.

To the merry sounds of a rustic bagpipe
Nymphs and shepherds dance in their beloved spot
When Spring appears in its brilliance.

Summer

Under the merciless summer sun
Languishes man and flock, the pine tree burns,
The cuckoo begins to sing and at once
Join in the turtle dove and the goldfinch.

A gentle breeze blows, but Boreas
Joins battle suddenly with his neighbor,
And the shepherd weeps because overhead
Hangs the dreaded storm, and his destiny.

His tired limbs are robbed of their rest
By his fear of the lightning and the heavy thunder
And by the furious swarm of flies and hornets.
Alas, his fears are well founded:
There is thunder and lightning in the sky and the hail
Cuts down the lofty ears of corn.

Autumn

The peasant celebrates with song and dance
The pleasure of the rich harvest,

And full of the liquor of Bacchus
They finish their merrymaking with a sleep.

All are made to leave off singing and dancing
By the air which now mild gives pleasure
And by the season which invites many
To enjoy a sweet sleep.

At dawn the hunters
With horns and guns and dogs leave their homes:
The beast flees; they follow its traces.

Already terrified and tired by the great noise Of the guns and the dogs, and wounded it
tries Feebly to escape, but exhausted dies.

Winter

Frozen and shivering in the icy snow,
In the strong blasts of a terrible wind
To run stamping one's feet at every step
With one's teeth chattering through the cold.

To spend the quiet and happy days by the fire
While outside the rain soaks everyone.
To walk on the ice with slow steps
And go carefully for fear of falling.

To go in haste, slide and fall down:
To go again on the ice and run,
Until the ice cracks and opens.

To hear leaving their iron-gated house Sirocco,
Boreas and all the winds in battle:
This is winter, but it brings joy.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra last performed *The Four Seasons* on January 31,
2005 with Christoph Poppen conducting.

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Vivaldi, *The Four
Seasons*,

Sarah Chang, violin, with the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, EMI 94431.