

Antonio Vivaldi *Le quattro stagioni* (The Four Seasons)
Elizabeth and Joseph Kahn, Program Notes, Phoenix Symphony
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Beginning in 1703 and intermittently for many decades, Antonio Vivaldi served as music factotum at the *Pio Ospedale della Pietà* in Venice, an institution devoted to the care and education of abandoned, orphaned and indigent girls – mostly “inconvenient” children of upperclass parents – with a special emphasis on musical training (no Dickensian work house or Dotheboys Hall this). In addition to his duties as virtuoso violinist, violin teacher, orchestra director and instrument purchaser, Vivaldi served as resident composer, producing hundreds of works for various instruments and ensembles, including nearly 450 concerti, usually at a rate of more than two per month. The resident girls were trained in both string and wind instruments, including the organ, and as part of their training Vivaldi composed concertos for every instrument and instrument combination. Many of them were apparently written with specific girl soloists in mind.

What is often overlooked, however, is that *Ospedale* also housed boys, teaching carpentry, blacksmithing and other trades. We have no idea whether the boys’ program was as successful as the girls’ since the names of the artisans who worked in Venice’s palaces and churches are generally unknown.

Vivaldi saw to it that his music reached far beyond the boundaries of Venice. Around 1711 an Amsterdam firm issued his first published concertos as Opus 3, entitled *L’estro armonico* (The Harmonic Fancy), a set of 12 concertos, four each for one, two or four violins, and four with added cello. They are at the boundary between the old tradition of the *Sonata da chiesa* (church sonata) with its stately slow-fast-slow-fast movements, and the newer three- movement concerto form (fast-slow-fast). *L’estro armonico* was a sensation, becoming the most influential music publication of the first half of the eighteenth century. J.S. Bach admired these works and transcribed some of them as harpsichord concerti.

The four concerti, known as *The Four Seasons*, are part of a group of eight violin concerti published in Amsterdam in 1725 as Op. 8. Vivaldi provided sonnets, probably his own, to head each of the four concerti. It is clear from the detailed notes Vivaldi made on the score that he enjoyed composing these concertos as well as performing them. Vivaldi attempted to make the music as programmatic as possible, marking with capital letters sections of the sonnets and their corresponding music.

Concerto in E major, Op. 8, No. 1, Spring

*Spring has returned and with it gaiety
Is greeted by the birds in joyous song
And the fountains, caressed by young zephyrs,
Murmur sweetly as they flow.*

*As the sky is clouded all in black,
Lightning flashes and thunder roars
But when they are over, the little birds,*

Return to sing their enchanting song.

*While on the flowering meadow,
Among the murmuring of leaves and boughs,
Dozes the goat-herd, watched over by his faithful dog.*

*To the pastoral bagpipes' festive sounds
Dance loving nymphs and shepherds, in love,
Under brilliant springtime skies.*

Setting the mood of the opening movement, the opening ritornello (recurrent phrase) is marked in the score "*The spring has returned.*" The first violin solo is marked "*Song of the birds,*" while after a return of the *ritornello*, comes a soft murmuring on the violin. After the next *ritornello* comes the lightning and thunder, followed by an extensive return to the singing birds and gaiety. The slow movement is a musical description of the snoozing goatherd, watched over by his dog, whose bark is imitated throughout the movement on the violas with repeated notes to be played "*very loud and abruptly.*" The third movement, a rustic dance, opens with a suggestion of rustic bagpipes, complete with an imitation of their drones by sustained notes on the low strings.

Concerto in G minor, Op. 8, No. 2, Summer

*Under the heat of the burning sun
Man droops, his herd wilts, the pine is parched
The cuckoo finds its voice, and singing with it,
The dove and the Goldfinch*

*Zephyr breathes gently but, countered,
The north wind appears nearby and suddenly
The shepherd cries because, uncertain,
He fears the wind squall and its effects*

*His tired limbs have no rest, goaded by
His fear of lightning and wild thunder
While gnats and flies in furious swarms surround him*

*Alas, his fears prove all too grounded
Thunder and lightning rive the heavens, and hail
Slices the tops of corn and other grain.*

The opening phrases droop in sympathy with the suffering people. Suddenly the violin depicts the singing of the birds. The zephyr's voice is heard gently on the violins and violas, interrupted by the wind squalls depicted by rapid scales on the violins and bursts by the entire ensemble. A lonely violin solo describes the weeping shepherd's apprehension of an impending storm. In the second movement, the shepherd's rest (solo violin) is interrupted repeatedly by his fear of distant thunder (strong tremolo by the whole orchestra). He tries to sleep again, but the gnats and flies (repeated dotted notes on the strings accompanying the solo violin) don't let him rest.

The third movement describes the violent storm, justifying the shepherd's fears. Darting scales in the violins describe the lightning while the cellos and basses portray thunder.

Concerto in F major, Op. 8, No. 3, Autumn

*The peasants celebrate with dance and song
The joy of a successful harvest.
With Bacchus' liquor liberally drunk,
Their festivity ends in slumber*

*They leave behind the song and dance
To seek the pleasant mild air.
The season invites more and more
To savor the joy of sweet sleep*

*The hunters leave for the hunt at dawn
With horns and guns and hounds they go
The quarry flees, but they pursue*

*Bewildered and exhausted by the great noise
of guns and hounds, the wounded prey
Nearly escapes, but is caught and dies.*

The concerto begins with the rhythmic dances and songs of the peasants, followed by uncertain lurches by the solo violin to depict their drunkenness, which gets wilder and wilder, alternating with the dance music. With a sudden shift to Larghetto, some of the revelers go to sleep while the dances continue. In the second movement, the muted strings become increasingly gentle as the slumber becomes deeper and deeper.

Violins imitate the hunting calls in the third movement. A wild melee in the orchestra describes the confusion of the hunt, the fleeing prey and its death, with the strings imitating the baying dogs.

Concerto in F minor, Op. 8, No. 4, Winter

*Frozen and shivering amid the chilly snow
Our breathing hampered by the horrid wind
As we run, we continually stamp our feet
Our teeth chatter with the awful cold*

*We move to the fire and contented peace
While the rain outside comes down in sheets.
We walk on the ice with slow steps
Careful how we walk, for fear of falling*

*If we move too fast, we slip and fall to the ground
Again treading heavily on the ice*

Until the ice breaks up and dissolves

*We hear from behind closed doors
Boreal winds and all the winds of war.
This is winter, but one that brings joy.*

The strings, with trills in the violins, describe the shivering in the winter cold. Swift arpeggios and scales by the solo violin describe the whipping of the wind, while a series of abrupt chords suggest stamping feet and running to get warm. But rapid tremolos show that all this activity is useless, since the teeth continue to chatter.

Violin pizzicati depict the falling raindrops, after which a warm melody on the solo violin describes the pleasant indoors with its roaring fire.

The Finale opens with sliding phrases by the violin - walking and slipping on thin ice. The orchestra joins with a slower rhythm to indicate the hesitant steps and fear of falling. But then we are back indoors, enjoying the warmth while the winds howl outside.