

Vivaldi's The Four Seasons
Program Notes
February 3 & 5, 2012

Solomon was composed during May and June 1748, and first presented during Handel's oratorio season at Covent Garden the following spring, on March 17, 1749. Though the performances seem to have been well attended, the work was given only two repetitions that year and then not revived for a decade; Handel included it in what proved to be his last season, in 1759. The oratorio's text, by an unknown librettist, deals with incidents recounted in II Chronicles and I Kings: the dedication of Solomon's newly completed temple and his happy marriage to Pharaoh's daughter (Act I); the famous adjudication of the dispute of the two harlots over the parentage of the baby (Act II); and the visit of the Queen of Sheba and her admiration for Solomon's wisdom and the splendor of his court (Act III). The sinfonia that prefaces the third act, usually titled (though not by Handel) *Entrance of the Queen of Sheba*, borrowed its principal thematic material from Giovanni Porta's opera *Numitore*, produced in London at the Haymarket in 1720. Handel originally sketched out the music in a version for the curious combination of two clarinets and *corno di caccia*, and reworked it for two oboes, strings and continuo as an entr'acte for *Solomon*. The movement, a sort of miniature *concerto grosso* for the oboes, is full of the pomp and bustle appropriate to a state visit at the highest levels of ancient government.

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Around 1905, during the difficult, poverty-ridden years after he completed his studies at the Liszt Conservatory in Budapest, Bartók was invited by a friend to spend a few days in the country. On the trip, he chanced to overhear one of the servant girls singing a strange and intriguing song while going about her chores. He asked her about the melody, and was told that the girl's mother had taught it to her, as her grandmother had passed it on a generation before, and that there were many more such songs. Bartók encouraged her to sing the others that she knew, and he soon realized that this sturdy folk music was little related to the slick Gypsy airs and dances of the city cafés that had long passed for indigenous Hungarian music. He determined that he would discover all that he could about the peasant music of his own and neighboring lands, and many of the years of the rest of his life were given over to collecting, cataloging and evaluating this vast heritage. Milton Cross characterized the music that Bartók discovered: "The melody was severe, patterned after the rise and ebb, the inflection, of Hungarian speech; the rhythms were irregular; the tonality reached back to the modes of the church. It was savage music: intense, passionate, strong and uninhibited. Nothing quite like it could be found anywhere else."

The style of this folk music immediately affected Bartók's mode of composition. While his larger concert works display the essence of folk songs rather than quoting them directly, some of the smaller ones are based faithfully on the models. Such is the case with this invigorating little set of *Rumanian Folk Dances*. They were first arranged for solo piano in 1915, and then orchestrated three years later. He collected the melodies for the seven brief movements between 1909 and 1914, and set them in an almost unaltered fashion, adding mainly the enriched but characteristic harmonic background. The tunes for the first and fourth sections he heard played by a Gypsy violinist; for movements five, six and seven, by a Rumanian

peasant fiddler; and for two and three, by a peasant on a rustic flute. The dances are mostly fast in tempo and fiery in nature, though the fourth dance, the centerpiece of the set, is slow and sinuous. The composer voiced his opinion of the exceptional quality of this village music with the words, “Folk melodies are a real model of the highest artistic perfection. To my mind, on a small scale, they are masterpieces, just as much as, in the world of larger forms, a fugue by Bach or a Mozart sonata.” Elaborating further on the importance of European folk song in a 1931 letter to Ion Busitia, he wrote, “My true guiding idea, which has possessed me completely ever since I began to compose, is that of the brotherhood of peoples, of their brotherhood despite all war, all conflict.... That is why I do not repulse any influence, whether its source be Slovak, Rumanian, Arab, or some other; provided this source be pure, fresh, and healthy!”

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From 1717 to 1723, Bach was director of music at the court of Anhalt-Cöthen, north of Leipzig. He liked his job. His employer, Prince Leopold, was a well-educated man, 24 years old at the time he engaged Bach. (Bach was 32.) Leopold was fond of travel and books and paintings, but his real passion was music. He was an accomplished musician who not only played violin, viola da gamba and harpsichord well enough to join with the professionals in his house orchestra, but also had an exceptional bass voice. He started the court musical establishment in 1707 with three players (his puritanical father had no use for music), and by the time of Bach’s appointment the ensemble had grown to nearly twenty performers equipped with a fine set of instruments. It was for this group that Bach wrote many of his outstanding instrumental works, including the Brandenburg Concertos, the Orchestral Suites, the Violin Concertos and much of his chamber music. Leopold appreciated Bach’s genius, and Bach returned the compliment when he said of his Prince, “He loved music, he was well acquainted with it, he understood it.” Though the exact dates of Bach’s Orchestral Suites are uncertain, all four were composed during or immediately after the Cöthen period.

These Suites (Bach would have called them “Ouvertures” — French for “opening piece” — after their majestic first movements) follow the early 18th-century German taste of deriving stylistic inspiration from France. It was Jean Baptiste Lully, composer to the legendary court of Louis XIV, whose operas and instrumental music set the fashion. Lully filled his operas with dances to please the taste of his ballet-mad King. If the mood struck him, Louis would even shed his ermine robes and tread a step or two with the dancers on stage. (Reports, all — understandably — laudatory, had it that he was excellent.) For formal ballroom dancing or dinner entertainment or concert performance, Lully extracted individual dance movements from his operas, prefaced them with the opera’s overture, and served them up as suites. This type of work, virtually the only Baroque genre for orchestra that did not involve soloists or singers, was carried to Germany by one of Lully’s students, Georg Muffat (1653-1704). Bach’s cousin Johann Bernhard (1676-1749), a talented organist in Johann Sebastian’s hometown of Eisenach, was one of the German musicians who became acquainted with this recent bit of French fashion. He concocted four suites of dances in the Lully/Muffat manner for the local town band, and Bach probably learned the French style from him. When Bach came to compose his Orchestral Suites, he was familiar not only with the French tradition of Lully through cousin Bernhard, but also with that of Italy (many German musicians of Bach’s generation were trained in Italy), and he was able to synthesize these two great streams of Baroque art in music which is both surpassingly majestic and melodically inspired. C.H. Parry

wrote that these Orchestral Suites show Bach's genius "in a singular and almost unique phase: for none of the movements, however gay and merry, ever loses the distinction of noble art. However freely they sparkle and play, they are never trivial, but bear even in the lightest moments the impress of a great mind and the essentially sincere character of the composer."

Each of Bach's four Suites is scored for a different orchestral ensemble. Three trumpets, two oboes and timpani join the strings and continuo (bass and keyboard) in the Third Suite. Each Suite comprises a grandiose Overture followed by a series of dances of various characters. The aptly named "French" Overtures are based on the type devised by Lully — a slow, almost pompous opening section filled with snapping rhythmic figures and rich harmony leading without pause to a spirited fugal passage in faster tempo. The majestic character of the opening section returns to round out the Overture's form. The chain of movements that follows varies from one Suite to the next, though Bach's sense of musical architecture demands that they create a pleasing balance of tempos and moods. The first such movement in the Third Suite bears the title *Air*, a general term used during Bach's time for an instrumental piece in slow tempo with a sweet, ingratiating melody in the upper voice. This haunting, bittersweet music is one of Bach's best-loved creations. Next is a pair of *Gavottes*, a dance of moderate liveliness whose ancestry traces back to French peasant music. The *Bourrée*, also of French origin, is joyful and diverting in character, and, when danced, was begun with a brisk leap, which is mirrored in Bach's quick upbeat pattern. The *Gigue* was derived from an English folk dance, and became popular as the model for instrumental compositions by French and Italian musicians when it migrated to the Continent.

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The *Gazette d'Amsterdam* of December 14, 1725 announced the issuance by the local publisher Michele Carlo Le Cène of a collection of twelve concertos for solo violin and orchestra by Antonio Vivaldi — *Il Cimento dell'Armonia e dell'Inventione*, or "*The Contest between Harmony and Invention*," Op. 8. The works were printed with a flowery dedication typical of the time to the Bohemian Count Wenzel von Morzin, a distant cousin of Haydn's patron before he came into the employ of the Esterházy family in 1761. On the title page, Vivaldi described himself as the "maestro in Italy" to the Count, though there is no record of his having held a formal position with him. Vivaldi probably met Morzin when he worked in Mantua from 1718 to 1720 for the Habsburg governor of that city, Prince Philipp of Hessen-Darmstadt, and apparently provided the Bohemian Count with an occasional composition on demand. (A bassoon concerto, RV 496, is headed with Morzin's name.)

Vivaldi claimed that Morzin had been enjoying the concertos of the 1725 Op. 8 set "for some years," implying earlier composition dates and a certain circulation of this music in manuscript copies, and hoped that their appearance in print would please his patron. The first four concertos, those depicting the seasons of the year, seem to have especially excited Morzin's admiration, so Vivaldi made specific the programmatic implications of the works by heading each of them with an anonymous sonnet, perhaps of his own devising, and then repeating the appropriate verses above the exact measures in the score which they had inspired. *The Four Seasons* pleased not only Count Morzin, but quickly became one of Vivaldi's most popular works. A pirated edition appeared in Paris within weeks of the Amsterdam publication, and by 1728, the concertos had become regular items on the programs of the Concert Spirituel in Paris. The

Spring Concerto was adapted in 1755 as an unaccompanied flute solo by Jean Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher and dilettante composer who was attracted by the work's musical portrayal of Nature, and as a motet (!) by Michel Corrette to the text "Laudate Dominum de coelis" in 1765. Today, *The Four Seasons* remains Vivaldi's best-known work, and one of the most beloved compositions in the orchestral repertory.

Of Vivaldi's more than 400 concertos, only 28 have titles, many of them referring to the performer who first played the work or to the occasion for which it was written. Of the few composition titles with true programmatic significance, seven are found in the Op. 8 collection: *The Four Seasons* plus *La Tempesta di Mare* ("The Storm at Sea"), *La Caccia* ("The Hunt") and *Il Piacere* ("Pleasure"). Concerning the title of the Op. 8 set — "*The Contest between Harmony and Invention*" — Amelia Haygood wrote, "'Harmony' represents the formal structure of the compositions; 'invention' the unhampered flow of the composer's creative imagination; and the 'contest' implies a dynamic balance between the two, which allows neither 'harmony' nor 'invention' to gain the upper hand. The perfect balance which results offers a richness in both areas: the outpouring of melody, the variety of instrumental color, the vivid musical imagery are all to be found within a formal framework which is elegant and solid."

Though specifically programmatic (Lawrence Gilman went so far as to call *The Four Seasons* "symphonic poems" and harbingers of Romanticism), the fast, outer movements of these works use the ritornello form usually found in Baroque concertos. The opening *ritornello* theme (Italian for "return"), depicting the general emotional mood of each fast movement, recurs to separate its various descriptive episodes, so that the music fulfills both the demands of creating a logical, abstract form and evoking vivid images from Nature. The slow, middle movements are lyrical, almost aria-like, in style. Though Vivaldi frequently utilized in these pieces the standard concertino, or solo group, of two violins and cello found in the 18th-century concerto grosso, *The Four Seasons* is truly a work for solo violin and orchestra, and much of the music's charm comes from the contrasting and interweaving of the soloist, concertino and accompanying orchestra. Of these evergreen concertos, Marc Pincherle, in his classic biography of Vivaldi, wrote, "Their breadth, their clearness of conception, the obvious pleasure with which the composer wrought them, the favorable reception which has been theirs from the first, their reverberations since then — all these unite to make them one of the masterpieces of the descriptive repertory."

For their publication of *The Four Seasons* in 1725, Vivaldi prefaced each of the concertos with an explanatory sonnet. These poems are given below with a note describing the music relating to the particular verses:

Spring, Op. 8, No. 1 (R. 269)

The spring has come, joyfully

(the vivacious opening section for full orchestra — the "ritornello" — that returns between episodes and at the end of the movement)

The birds welcome it with merry song

(trills and shakes, violins)

And the streams, in the gentle breezes, flow forth with sweet murmurs.

(undulating violin phrases)

Now the sky is draped in black,
Thunder and lightning announce a storm.

(tremolos and fast scales)

When the storm has passed, the little birds
Return to their harmonious songs.

(gently rising phrases and long trills in the violins)

And in the lovely meadow full of flowers,
To the gentle rustling of leaves and branches,
The goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog at his side. (Movement II)

To the rustic bagpipe's merry sound,
Nymphs and shepherds dance under the lovely sky
When spring appears in all its brilliance. (Movement III)

Summer, Op. 8, No. 2 (R. 315)

In the heat of the blazing summer sun,
Man and beast languish; the pine tree is scorched.

(the enervated "ritornello")

The cuckoo raises his voice

(wide, fast leaps in the solo violin)

Soon the turtledove and goldfinch join in the song.

(A solo violin episode with leaps and trills)

A gentle breeze blows

(quick triplets, violins)

But then the north wind battles with its neighbor

(rushing scales, full orchestra)

And the shepherd weeps

(expressive, chromatic theme for solo violin and continuo)

As above him the dreaded storm gathers, controlling his fate.

(forceful scales and figurations in the full orchestra)

His weary limbs are roused from rest

By his fear of the lightning and fierce thunder

And by the angry swarms of flies and hornets.

(Movement II, alternating bittersweet complaints from the solo violin with quick, repeated note interjections by the full orchestra)

Alas, his fears are borne out

Thunder and lightning dominate the sky

Bending down the tops of trees and flattening the grain.
(the tempestuous third movement)

Autumn, Op. 8, No. 3 (R. 293)

The peasant celebrates with dance and song
The joy of a fine harvest
(the merry opening “ritornello”)
And filled with Bacchus’ liquor
(inebriated arpeggios, scales, trills and figurations from the solo violin alternating with the “ritornello” theme)
He ends his fun in sleep.
(progressively slower notes in the solo violin until the music stops completely before ending with the “ritornello” theme)

Everyone is made to leave dancing and singing
The air is gentle and pleasing
And the season invites everyone
To enjoy a delightful sleep. (Movement II)

At dawn the hunters set out
With horns, guns and dogs.
(the bounding main theme)
The hunted animal flees, the hunters follow its tracks
(arpeggiated triplets in the solo violin)
Terrified and exhausted by the great noise
Of guns and dogs.
(violent, shaking figures in the orchestra)
Wounded, it tries feebly to escape,
But is caught and dies.
(flashing scales by the soloist cut short by the violent interjections of the orchestra)

Winter, Op. 8, No. 4 (R. 297)

Freezing and shivering in the icy darkness
(the chordal, almost motionless main theme)
In the severe gusts of a terrible wind
(rushing scales and chords in the solo violin)
Running and stamping one’s feet constantly
(a brief, repeated note alternating with a leaping figure)
So chilled that one’s teeth chatter.
(tremolo)

Spending quiet and happy days by the fire
While outside the rain pours everywhere. (Movement II)

Walking on the ice with slow steps
(the plaintive main theme, solo violin)
Walking carefully for fear of falling
(slow, steady chords in the orchestra)
Then stepping out boldly, and falling down.
(quick scales and then several brief descending flourishes)
Going out once again onto the ice, and running boldly
(steady motion up and down the scale in the solo violin)
Until the ice cracks and breaks,
(snapping, separated figures)
Hearing, as they burst forth from their iron gates, the Scirocco,
(a smooth melody in close-interval harmony)
The North Wind, and all the winds battling.
This is winter, but such joy it brings.
(rushing figurations close the work)

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