

FOUR SEASONS: TWO WAYS

Here, in the depths of winter and at the start of a new year, the two works on this KSO programme remind us of the unending seasonal cycle that links us all, year by year, and that what is old eventually becomes new again. In music too this is true, for when we place Vivaldi directly beside Philip Glass as we do tonight, we will hear just how much the modern musical voice emerges from the past, and conversely how attributes of the older voice foreshadow the new.

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) *The Four Seasons* (1725)

Everyone enjoys a good contest—the competition between opposing forces. Vivaldi certainly did. He published the four violin concertos which we know as *The Four Seasons* in 1725 in a larger collection he titled “The contest between harmony and invention.” His title points to the conflict inherent between the demands of musical composition and structure on one hand, and the opportunities for solo improvisation and spontaneous technical display. Vivaldi’s era saw the emergence of the virtuoso performer, and he himself was acknowledged as an astounding violinist, both fiery in technique and volatile in personality. His concertos, for a range of instruments but especially those for violin, are frequently showcases for the instrumental soloist. His *Four Seasons* certainly present the soloist with impressive opportunities for technical display.

Nonetheless, however much we admire *The Four Seasons* for their spectacular solo violin passages, it is the descriptive purpose of the music that captures our affection. For this is “programme” music, music designed to refer to elements outside the music itself: places, actions, characters. Since the Middle Ages, there had been a rich tradition of music “painting” in vocal music, with singers evoking birds, breezes, lover’s sighs, joys and despairs. With Vivaldi the “painting” becomes instrumental. Perhaps in imitation of this vocal tradition, Vivaldi wrote brief scenarios for each season, and then he used letters, A, B, C etc. beside each section of them cued to places in the score, to make the link between the music and the details of his seasonal scenarios absolutely clear.

Beneath the action of each season runs the basic structure of the concerto form: fast movement, slow movement, then fast again, as well as the alternation between solo violinist and the string orchestra. Of course, in each case Vivaldi makes the actions appropriate to the tempo. So, in the opening Allegro of “*La Primavera*” Spring’s arrival is greeted by the twittering of birds and the murmur of a stream, until a thunder storm arrives, after which calm is restored. The Largo movement presents a gentle pastoral scene, a dozing goat-herd with his dog that barks persistently throughout. And in the closing Allegro pastorale we are in the world of merrymaking shepherds (and nymphs) with the drone of their bagpipes as they dance, not too energetically.

Likewise, in ‘Summer’ the languorous depiction of the incessant heat is followed in the Adagio by forebodings of a storm which then breaks out, unrestrained, in the turbulent Presto. The harvest season is justifiably celebratory, but overindulgence seems to result in a certain unsteadiness of gait and a bit of a time out is required before a return to the merriment. The Adagio movement portrays a rather heavy and uncomfortable night of slumber before everyone reluctantly awakes at the start of the Allegro and jogs out for the hunt that includes gunshots.

Everyone has their favourite Vivaldi season. For many it is ‘Winter’ with its delicate evocations of teeth-chattering and robust foot-stamping frigidities in the Allegro; the graceful melody of indoor contentment in the

Largo (accompanied by pizzicato rain falling outside); or the brilliant musical embodiment of the perils of winter walking with, it seems, their inevitable outcome.

Philip Glass (1933) *The American Four Seasons - Violin Concert No. 2* (2009)

For much of his working life, Vivaldi, (nicknamed “il preto rosso,” the red priest, on account of his hair colour) was music director of the Ospedale in Venice, an orphanage for abandoned girls whose musical skills he honed to such a level they became a tourist attraction. Much of Vivaldi’s enormous instrumental output (over 500 concertos) was written for them, but lay unpublished until after World War II. Then its gradual availability fuelled widespread interest in Baroque music generally and Vivaldi in particular. Thus, the composition of Philip Glass’s American Four Seasons (2009) should not be a surprise—in some ways Vivaldi is as much a 20th and 21st century phenomenon as an 18th century one.

Glass’s concerto was commissioned by American violinist Robert McDuffie to be a companion piece to Vivaldi’s set of concertos. Hearing it in performance tonight alongside its early 18th century model permits us some interesting musical comparisons, some structural and others matters of style. Some may reveal how much classical music has changed, others reveal surprising similarities between musical periods 300 years apart. One can see immediately that the structure is somewhat different. Although there are four main numbered movements their exact seasonal equivalences or sequence are not prescribed. No helpful Vivaldian descriptions with a coded lettering system. Instead, in a democratically modern way, individual listeners must make those connections as they see fit.

Each of Glass’s main movements is preceded by a shorter, solo violin piece—the opening “Prologue” and then three “Songs” — all technically demanding in the manner of a Bach partita, but generally quiet and reflective rather than dramatic in the way a violin cadenza might be. As for the main “Movements,” the first of these is spirited and demanding, and grabs our attention from the start. The second movement, the longest, is also the most subdued. Sombre to start, then wistful, there are climaxes and quieter meditative passages; its sounds rich but resigned. Could this be “the season of mist and mellow fruitfulness”? Just gessin!

The concerto gains momentum in Movements 3 and 4, their unrelenting forward energy supplied by those repetitive Minimalist musical techniques, recognizable if you’ve heard some of Glass’s other music. However, having heard Vivaldi earlier we may be struck with similarities between the two composers’ techniques as much as by their differences. Movement 4 presents an almost sustained climax, relieved momentarily in the middle, only to be restored by a hard-driving collaboration between soloist and orchestra (not unlike moments in Vivaldi), which makes for a rousing musical conclusion.