

Program 2 Notes

by Jon Kochavi

The Four Seasons, Op. 8 (1725)

Spring
Summer
Autumn
Winter

Vivaldi was among the most prolific and influential composers who ever lived. This was especially true in the realm of the concerto. Vivaldi wrote over 500 during his lifetime, including at least 230 for violin, his own instrument. (He once bragged that he could compose a concerto in less time than it took to copy out an existing score, which was probably not far from the truth!) In many ways, he defined the genre for both his contemporaries and for generations of composers to come. He standardized the three movement fast-slow-fast form for concertos and refined the alternating use of ritornello sections (in which the entire orchestra plays a recurring theme) and episodes (usually featuring the solo instrument with contrasting melodic material).

Each of the four enormously popular *Four Seasons* concertos conforms to these norms, but Vivaldi takes things a step further here. He published the works in 1725 as part of a collection he entitled *Il Cimento dell' Armonia e dell'Inventione* (“The Conflict



Antonio Vivaldi
(1678-1741)

between Harmony and Invention”). His goal with these works was to mesh the requirements of concerto form with the vivid depiction of specific elements of a “program”. The narrative he depicts in each concerto was spelled out in four sonnets about the seasons probably written by Vivaldi himself—the composer is the scribe. The music references elements in each

poem, which Vivaldi makes clear in the printed score.

The first movement of *Spring* is wonderfully evocative, setting the tone for the set: we hear bird calls, the murmuring of the springs fed by the melting snow, and even rolls of the thunder from the seasonal rains. In the second movement, the gentle melody of the soloist represents the sleeping goatherd, the violins sway as the leaves and plants, and the insistent interjections of the violas humorously evoke a barking dog. The final movement is a springtime country dance.

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The halting, chromatic opening of *Summer* is meant to evoke a laziness brought on by the heat. This music alternates with the soloist representing calls of the cuckoo, turtledove, and goldfinch before the winds pick up—the first hints of the coming storm. The middle movement has the accompaniment buzzing with flies and wasps, but also interjecting distant thunder. The storm finally arrives in full fury in the glorious final movement.

Autumn opens with what at first seems like a simple stately village dance, but a stumbling drunk throws the proceedings into chaos. Order is only restored when the fellow passes out (listen for the sustained “breathing” in the solo part). The brief middle movement depicts this peaceful sleep, “the great pleasure of sweetest slumber”. Morning has arrived in the third movement, and the villagers go out for a bird hunt. The soloist eventually takes on the role of the doomed bird, and the music briefly turns minor as the gunshots meet their mark.

The icy opening to *Winter* uses repeated-note figures to alternately represent shivering, teeth-chattering, harsh winds, and stomping of feet to keep warm. Pizzicato articulation in the violins in the middle movement depicts the drenching rain heard outside from the comfort of a spot indoors by the fire. The sustained tones in the accompaniment of the final movement represent the slick ice as the soloist steps carefully, falling nonetheless. When the sustained tones cut off, we hear the ice break, and the concerto ends with the return of the winter winds. ❄️



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Symphony No. 40 in G minor, K. 550 (1788)

Allegro molto
Andante
Menuetto
Finale (Allegro assai)

To this day, we do not know the exact reason Mozart decided to compose his ethereal G minor symphony, or any of his last three symphonies for that matter. Over a two-month span in the summer of 1788, Mozart composed all three of these works while trying to find a way to shore up his declining finances.

Although he made close to 4000 florins in 1784, Mozart’s earnings had been steadily decreasing to the point that he earned less than 2000 florins in 1788. Given his precarious finances, it is unlikely that Mozart would have composed these works without prospect for performance, but there are only vague hints that the G minor symphony was played during his lifetime. Mozart revised the work in 1791 to include clarinets (the version that is usually played today), which he almost certainly would not have done unless preparing the score for a particular performance. In any event, the piece has gone on to achieve iconic status in the symphonic literature.

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There is a certain sense of perfection throughout the work: the themes, the formal structure, and the orchestral balance all seem to fall together flawlessly, the epitome of the Classical ideal. At the same time, the symphony is clearly expanding the emotional palette, communicating Romantic way. It is the passion of the "Great" G minor symphony that inspired composers who followed and still moves audiences to this day.

Pulsating viola figures underlie the sorrowful string melody and provide the opening with an agitated, nervous energy that in a sense carries through the entire symphony. The B-flat major second theme seems to give some emotional respite, but its return in minor in the recapitulation is particularly tragic, especially after the passionate outcry of the development section.

The second movement is in sonata form built around a single theme. The main theme here is deceptively simple, possessing enough chromatic elements for Mozart to mine for the remainder of the movement. But listen for the quick two-note figure that appears in

the opening phrases. Although these figures initially sound like peripheral ornaments, Mozart cleverly turns them into the recurring motif of the movement.

With the third movement, Mozart has extended the minuet to its logical extreme. The stately Baroque dance has been transformed into a vehicle for a passionate outpouring of emotion, and we recognize it in form and meter only. The trio attempts to recover more of its original essence, drawing on a pastoral *ländler* (an Austrian folk dance), but the minuet proper looms over this bright, brief respite.

The first theme of the final movement is almost angry in its declamation. This mood is carried over in the shocking development section, which begins with ferocious chromaticism that Mozart does not even attempt to contextualize or resolve. There is no happy ending here; the music is resigned to its tragic fate. We must wait for Mozart's final symphonic foray (completed two weeks after No. 40) for ultimate triumph. 🎻



Nearly a half century ago, it was the inspired vision of Concertmaster Emeritus Charles Meacham that led to the founding of the Marin Symphony—giving us, the people of Marin, a symphony orchestra of our very own.

Charles Meacham retired in 1992 at the end of his memorable fortieth season as concertmaster of our symphony orchestra.

It is with deep regret that we announce his passing August 29, 2009. His enduring legacy lives on. 🎻

Born into a musical family in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Ms. Pitcairn began studying the violin at age three and performed her first concerto with orchestra at age 14. She made her New York debut at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall in 2000 with the New York String Orchestra, and she appeared as soloist with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Academy of Music.

She has engaged in numerous high-profile creative projects worldwide, including collaborating with Lionsgate Films for the 10th anniversary re-release of *The Red Violin* DVD featuring documentary interviews by Pitcairn and Oscar-winning composer John Corigliano; performing the world premiere of Swedish composer Tommie Haglund's violin concerto *Hymns to the Night*, dedicated to her, and performing her debut concert to great acclaim with the Puerto Rico Symphony.

She has studied with preeminent violin professor Robert Lipsett at the University of Southern California Thornton School of Music (where she was a former adjunct professor of violin) and is currently a member of the distinguished faculty at the Colburn School of Performing Arts in Los Angeles.

In Her Words . . .

I think Vivaldi does something special to the emotional portion of the brain with its rising sequences. You play a little motif. As it goes up in scale form, building toward a resolution, a lot of tension is created in the music. Studies show that the rising sequences of Vivaldi's music releases something in the brain, like a feel-good chemical, similar to



Elizabeth Pitcairn, violin

an addiction while you're playing it. It puts you in a place where both the performer and the listener like to go—like a runner's high, but more profound. There is purity—a beauty that makes you want to cry; plus there's intense sadness and longing—a whole range of human emotions. Vivaldi's music adds an emotional enhancement that makes one feel things more intensely. The performer picks up on the audience; the audience sees the performer's reaction and reacts. People tell me they can sense the moment I leave my body and am completely in the music.

Elizabeth Pitcairn CD's and *The Red Violin* (10th anniversary edition) will be on sale in the lobby during the intermission. Join Ms. Pitcairn after the concert to have them autographed.

The complete biography of Elizabeth Pitcairn is on our website: www.marinsymphony.org 🎻

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