

Program Notes

by April L. Racana

13
Sep22
Sep

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

The Four Seasons (Le Quattro Stagioni)
(Violin Concertos Op. 8, Nos. 1-4)

The Four Seasons comprise the first four concertos from a set of twelve that were published in 1725 with the title *Il Cimento dell'Armonia e dell'Invenzione* ("The Trial of Harmony and Invention"). At the time they were written, the concerto as a form was not yet formally recognized, but soon after, it is believed many composers followed Vivaldi's lead adapting this format for their own works. In addition, the programmatic nature of these pieces was taken to a much more detailed level than had been with other similar pieces of the time. The composer not only wrote specific descriptions directly in the score that he intended the music to depict, but he is also believed to have written a sonnet to go with each movement as well.

In the first movement, "Spring", Vivaldi indicated at various points in the music, "songs of birds," "the brook flows," and "thunderclaps," clearly wanting to depict specific sounds of the season. In the second movement, the violins are said to be imitating "the murmuring of boughs and grasses," while the sharp viola sounds as "the barking dog." The solo violinist is meant to represent "the sleeping goatherd." The sonnets below were published with the Amsterdam edition as a poetic description of each movement, which many scholars attribute to Vivaldi:

Concerto No. 1 in E major, RV269, "Spring"I. *Allegro*.

Spring has come and joyfully

The birds greet it with happy song,

And the brooks, while zephyrs gently blow,

13
Sep22
Sep

With sweet murmuring flow along.

Then come, shrouding the air with a black cloak,
Lightning and thunder chosen to herald it;
Then, when these are silent, the little birds
Return to their melodious incantations.

II. *Largo*.

And now, in the gaily flowered meadow,
To the soft murmuring of boughs and grasses,
The goatherd sleeps with his faithful dog at his side.

III. *Allegro*.

To the festive sound of a pastoral pipe,
Nymphs and shepherds dance under their beloved sky
At the glittering appearance of spring.

Concerto No. 2 in G minor, RV315, “Summer”

I. *Allegro non molto; Allegro*.

In the harsh season scorched by the sun,
Languish man and flock, and the pine is set afire;
The cuckoo begins to call, and soon after,
The turtle-dove and the goldfinch are heard singing.

Zephyr sweetly blows, but Boreas suddenly
Enters into a contest with its neighbor;
And the little shepherd weeps, for he fears
The awesome threatening storm, and his fate;

II. *Adagio; Presto*.

To his tired limbs rest is denied
By the fear of lightning, awesome thunder
And the furious swarm of gnats and flies!

III. *Presto*.

Alas, his fears are justified.
The sky is filled with thunder and lightning.
And hail cuts down the proud grain.

13
Sep

22
Sep

Concerto No. 3 in F major, RV293, “Autumn”I. *Allegro*.

The peasant celebrates with dances and songs
 The pleasure of the happy harvest;
 And inflamed by the wine of Bacchus, many
 End with sleep their revelry.

II. *Adagio molto*.

The mild peasant air makes all abandon dance and song;
 This is the season which invites all mankind
 To the sweet delights of peaceful sleep.

III. *Allegro*.

The hunters, at the break of dawn,
 With horns, guns, and hounds set forth
 The animal flees, and they follow its tracks;

Already frightened and tired by the great noise
 Of guns and hounds, the wounded animal attempts
 Vainly to flee, but is overcome and dies.

Concerto No. 4 in F minor, RV297, “Winter”I. *Allegro non molto*.

Trembling with cold amidst icy snows
 While a frightful wind harshly blows,
 Running and stamping one’s feet every minute:
 And from the unbearable cold feeling one’s teeth chatter.

II. *Largo*.

Spending quiet contented days by the hearth
 While the rain outside drenches people by the hundreds;
 Walking on ice, and moving about cautiously
 With slow steps for fear of falling;

III. *Allegro*.

Rushing, slipping, falling down,
 Again walking on ice and running fast
 Until the ice cracks and splits;

13
Sep22
Sep

Hearing burst forth from the bolted doors
Sirocco, Boreas, and all the winds at war.
This is winter, but O what joy it brings!

Work composed, World premiere: unknown
Instrumentation: Basso Continuo, strings, solo violin

Gustav Theodore Holst (1874-1934) Suite "The Planets" Op. 32

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| 1. Mars, The Bringer Of War | 5. Saturn, The Bringer Of Old Age |
| 2. Venus, The Bringer Of Peace | 6. Uranus, The Magician |
| 3. Mercury, The Winged Messenger | 7. Neptune, The Mystic |
| 4. Jupiter, The Bringer Of Jollity | |

Writing to a friend in 1913, Holst stated: "As a rule I only study things which suggest music to me.... recently the character of each planet suggested lots to me..." In between two jobs, (that of a teacher as well as a professional trombonist), that kept him working at a hectic pace, Holst managed time to write what has become this English composer's most popular work between the years 1914-1916. In spite of its popularity, Holst is said to have commented that he felt it wasn't one of his best works and often felt his other works were slighted as a result.

This orchestral suite was inspired after Holst spent a cycling holiday in 1907 with Henry Balfour Gardiner and two brothers, Arnold and Clifford Bax. The latter spent a great portion of the time discussing astrology, which peaked Holst's interest, even though his companions soon tired of the subject. The composer continued to read up on astrology, reading Alan Leo's "What is a Horoscope?", and may have borrowed ideas for the subtitles for each of the movements from this text.

Each movement is based on the Roman Gods associated with each planet: *Mars*, with its asymmetrical 5/4 rhythms and triumphant fanfares, seems to represent both the horrors and glories of war. In contrast, *Venus* opens with the horns' ascending tranquil subject countered by the winds' descending phrases.

Mercury is a dancing scherzo, reflecting the messenger flitting around, occasionally in simultaneous bitonal keys. *Jupiter* not only portrays the jovial character of this ruler of the gods, but also conveys his more regal side in the central hymn-like tune, which was later used as a melody for the hymn "I Vow to Thee My Country."

The bell-tones of *Saturn* reflect approaching old age, and may have been inspired by two old men Holst is said to have heard ringing church bells at Durham Cathedral. The peace and serenity at the end of this movement is disrupted suddenly by the brash entonings of the brass in the opening of *Uranus*. The skipping rhythms, which build to a swirling climax, have been said to be reminiscent of Paul Dukas' wizard in "The Sorcerer's Apprentice". Holst closes this suite with a quiet mysteriousness in *Neptune*. The orchestra is joined by an off-stage chorus of women's voices, repeating two chords, until they fade in the distance.

13
Sep22
Sep

Work composed: 1914-1916 **World premiere:** September 29, 1918 in London (in a private concert) , February 27, 1919 in London (Five Movements), November 15, 1920 in London (Complete)

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (3rd doubling on piccolo, 4th doubling on piccolo & bass flute), 3 oboes (3rd doubling on bass oboe), English horn, 3 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons, contrabassoon, 6 horns, 4 trumpets, 3 trombones, tenor tuba, bass tuba, timpani (2 players), percussion (tambourine, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, tam-tam, tubular bells, glockenspiel, xylophone), 2 harps, celesta, organ, strings, female chorus (6 parts)

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