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Antonio Vivaldi
THE FOUR SEASONS

Nature and her seasons have inspired many famous composers, including Haydn, Tchaikovsky and Beethoven. The most famous of all is Vivaldi's, *The Four Seasons*. Delightfully fresh and buoyant, these four short concertos for violin depict in concise and vivid detail each of the four periods of the year. Like the seasons themselves, each of the four concertos carries a particular tone or feeling that is quite different from the rest. From the lively, green fields of springtime to the frozen world of winter, the listener is never unsure of what kind of landscape unfolds before him. In addition, the incomparable vitality of the music makes it every bit as accessible to modern ears as to the eighteenth century listeners who first had the pleasure of hearing it.

Vivaldi's vibrant personality shines through these four works, giving them a human, or personal, quality not often found in music of the eighteenth century. Most of what we can infer about the man himself, in fact, comes from his music, since information on Vivaldi's life is scarce. Many early records and the accounts of his contemporaries have vanished through the ages, either lost, destroyed by fire or decayed by the moist, humid weather of his native Venice. So as clear and present as Vivaldi's music is, his life remains in many ways a tantalizing puzzle.

He was born in Venice, on March 4, 1678. As a matter of fact, the date has only recently been established for certain, when a trove of records was discovered sealed away in the tiny church of San Giovanni where Vivaldi was baptized. According to the church records, Vivaldi was not formally christened until four months after his birth, due to the precarious state of his health. Perhaps he was born prematurely, since his parents celebrated their marriage only seven months before he was born.

It is also possible that he was conceived out of wedlock -- not an uncommon occurrence in those days. In that case, the lapse of time between his birth and christening suggests an early childhood illness. Indeed, poor health troubled him throughout his life. He often complained of a tightness in his chest, which may have been the result of asthma or angina pectoris. Curiously, his health did not seem to inhibit the ferocious energy he poured into his work. His output included more than five hundred concertos and sonatas, at least forty-six operas, and dozens of sacred choral works.

Venice, Vivaldi's birthplace, is every bit as fascinating and enigmatic as her famous son. A network of romantic canals, traversed by small boats and varnished gondolas, divides the city into innumerable small districts. Narrow cobblestone streets afford pedestrians an opportunity to pass among gilded mansions and quaint stone houses that have withstood the passage of centuries.

Small shops display the wares of the famous Venetian glass blowers and furniture makers, who practice their craft with the same unique artistry they employed in Vivaldi's day. Then, as now, visitors of all nationalities flocked to the city, traveling by small craft from the Italian mainland, or sailing across the majestic, unruffled Adriatic Sea into the imposing harbor, once home to one of the proudest fleets Europe had ever seen.

Throughout Vivaldi's life, and indeed for several centuries before, Venice enjoyed imperial power and splendor. Until the nineteenth century, Venice was a powerful, independent republic, and her holdings included the islands of Crete and Cyprus, as well as the Turkish city of Constantinople. Trade flourished, bringing gold, silk, spices and diverse cultural influences into the city. Justifiably proud of their wealth and civilization, the Venetians of Vivaldi's day took great delight in pageants, parades and spectacles of all varieties. Artists of every sort found a happy home there, and bountiful patrons.

Music held chief place among the many entertainments Venice lavished on her citizens and visitors. Crowds gathered nightly in the grand plazas and along the gently rippling canals to hear small bands of musicians playing spirited airs on violin and horn, or the lilting songs of handsome gondoliers. From the windows of the stately home of wealthy aristocrats and out the open doors of magnificent churches floated music of a grander, more serious nature.

Nor was this marvelous outpouring confined to the talents of skilled musicians. One eighteenth century British visitor recorded his amazement that, "a cobbler or a blacksmith in his workclothes suddenly lifts his voice; soon other tradespeople join in, singing in parts and with a delicacy and precision hardly paralleled in fashionable society in our northern countries."

Born and raised in such an enthusiastically musical environment, Vivaldi easily found ready support for exercising his talent. His own father had been trained as a barber and wigmaker, but developed such skill as a violinist that he soon gave up his first career and entered the service of the grand Cathedral San Marco as a professional violinist. His reputation became so great that he was even listed in a handbook for visitors to the city as one of the finest violinists in all Venice. Vivaldi received musical training not only from his talented father, but from other cathedral musicians as well. It appears he showed himself equal to his father's skill, for as a young boy he joined the ranks of cathedral players.

His work at the cathedral brought him into frequent contact with church officials. Possibly their kindness and intelligence inspired him to join the priesthood. At the age of fifteen, he took his vows, and began the ten year period of training that led to his ordination. He said his final vows at twenty-five, and from then on was affectionately known as "Il Prete Rosso," the Red Priest. Apparently, musical talent was not the only gift he inherited from his father. Both possessed a fine head of startling red hair.

The unusually long time Vivaldi took to complete his religious training may have been caused by his ill health. However, another explanation has circulated since Vivaldi's time. Contemporaries of the composer privately suggested that Vivaldi's interest in religion held second place to his passion for music. He may have seen the Church as a secure haven in which to develop his musical aspirations. A story told widely during Vivaldi's life has him saying Mass one day, when a musical idea came to mind. He immediately left the altar and went to the sacristy to jot the idea down, and then returned to finish the Mass. Late in life, Vivaldi himself substantiated the basic facts of the story, but attributed his abrupt departure from his duty to an attack of chest pain. In any case, the Church fathers thought his lapses a bit strange, and though they did not strip him of his rank, they forbade him to say Mass from that time on.

Thus deprived of performing the central function of a priest, Vivaldi decided to change careers. In relatively short order, he obtained a position as a violin teacher in a school for foundling girls, the "Seminario Musicale dell'Ospedale della Pietà." Four such charitable institutions, or "Ospedali," existed in Venice in Vivaldi's day. Supported by the Venetian government, they had been established in the 14th century to deal with the dilemma of an increasing number of homeless children in the city. More than one thousand girls lived in the Pietà school when Vivaldi became a teacher there.

Since their founding, the four "Ospedali" had evolved from simple orphanages into formidable educational institutions. The girls who lived there received either a general education or a dedicated musical training, depending on their skills and abilities. The "Ospedali" depended on concerts given by the students for part of their funding, and the girls trained in music became the elite members of the school. They received special treatment in terms of health care and training, and as they grew older they took on special jobs in the school, teaching younger girls, organizing concerts and making sure that the instruments were well cared for. An intense rivalry between the four institutions grew over the years. In Vivaldi's day, the Pietà school was the most renowned, and it is probably for that reason he applied there.

By all accounts, Vivaldi enjoyed teaching, and under his capable hand the students prospered as they never had before. The board of governors recognized his effectiveness and soon increased

his responsibilities at the school. Within a year, he began writing compositions for the girls and performing with them in concert. With his addition to the faculty, the school's reputation became even more distinguished. Few composers could have asked for a more satisfying situation. Vivaldi had at his disposal an orchestra of gifted musicians with no other concern than perfecting their craft. The girls were inspired by his energy and interest, and their dedication inspired him.

Although his first love would always be the violin, he experimented with a variety of instruments and combinations, drawing on the individual capabilities of each of his students. The unmistakably brilliant and exuberant music he wrote during his forty year association with the school reflects the joy he felt in working with these remarkably talented girls.

During the first six years at the Pietà, Vivaldi published two collections of his works. While the first received a warm reception in Venice, the second collection began to establish his reputation outside of the Republic. For, besides being a talented composer, Vivaldi proved himself a canny businessman. The King of Denmark had attended two of his concerts at the Pietà, and formed a very favorable impression of the young violin master. Accordingly, when the second collection of his works came out, Vivaldi added an extremely gracious dedication to the King and had copies sent to his court in Denmark. Music lovers of the northern countries thus began to be familiar with his ability.

In 1711, he published a third collection of concertos, entitled, "The Harmonic Spirit." This series of twelve pieces, printed by a Dutch publisher, quickly established Vivaldi's fame throughout Europe. Patrons of music from all corners began asking for copies of his work, and he gratefully obliged, applying himself furiously to the composition of new pieces. Unfortunately, Vivaldi's ambition got him into trouble with the Pietà's board of governors. They felt that his interests outside the school interfered with his responsibilities. Twice during his early tenure, the board voted to relieve him of his duties. During his first absence from the school, between 1709 and 1711, he traveled through Europe giving concerts. In 1711, the board of governors, recognizing a decline in the girls' training, asked him back. This time, he remained at the school until 1717.

During this second tenure at the Pietà, Vivaldi became absorbed in the writing of operas. His enchanting, original and lyrical style soon won him acclaim in this field as well. After the highly successful production of his first opera, "Ottone in Villa," he set a characteristically ferocious pace for himself, bringing forth an average of two operas a year. He prided himself on composing faster than the copyists could write out the scores. On the cover of his opera, "Tito Manillo," he boasted that the work had taken him only five days to complete. Perhaps his close association with the worldly atmosphere of the theater made the board of directors uncomfortable, for at the end of 1717, Vivaldi found himself relieved of his duties once more.

Accordingly, he left the narrow streets and twisting canals of Venice for the wide open countryside of Lombardy. Eventually, he arrived in Mantua, an Italian city then ruled by the Austrian Empire. He remained there until 1723, in the service of the German governor, Prince Phillip of Hesse-Darmstadt. Prince Philip was a devoted patron of the arts, and Vivaldi enjoyed great freedom under his employ. Although he occupied himself chiefly in the production of operas, he did take the time to write some instrumental works.

The most famous of these, of course, are the concertos known as "The Four Seasons."

No doubt the sunny countryside, with its gently sloping hills and tenderly cultivated fields full of toiling peasants, inspired Vivaldi in ways the imposing cityscape of Venice could not. While still expressing some of the breathless and vivacious urgency that distinguishes most of his work, "The Four Seasons" nevertheless radiate a languid grace and charm that make them particularly easy to listen to. Vivaldi employed the fast-slow-fast, three movement format typical of concertos written in his day. In particular, the slow movements of his "Four Seasons" exhibit a fluidity of style that reflects the more relaxed atmosphere in which he wrote them. It is easy to imagine him taking his time to enjoy the sight of springtime clouds drifting by, or the thick, heavy fall of winter snow.

His direct inspiration for these pieces seems to have been a set of four short poems on the seasons, penned by an anonymous author. In the printed score, Vivaldi wrote the words of each poem over the appropriate sections of the music. The first one, "Spring," amply illustrates the effect Vivaldi tried to achieve in his music:

Spring has come, full of birds' happy song; A stream rolls by and gentle breezes blow.

In time, the sky grows black, and
Thunder and lightning speak their piece.

When the storm is gone, the little birds return again with happy songs...

These complete the images taken up in the first movement of the "Spring" concerto. The slow movement unfolds a scene of a shepherd sleeping on a flowery meadow, while his faithful dog runs playfully around him. The last movement describes a lilting dance of shepherds and nymphs.

"Summer" begins with piercing sunshine and the song of the cuckoo and turtle dove. The north wind blows up suddenly, setting the farmers to worry over their ripening crops. The second movement depicts the eerie calm before the storm, punctuated from time to time by the buzz of bluebottle flies. The concerto concludes with the fearful onslaught of the storm, which scatters the crops and sends the farmers running.

In "Autumn," the listener is treated to the merry dance tunes of a harvest celebration, complete with syncopated "hiccups" as the peasants grow drunk on wine. The haunting, vivid dreams induced by their indulgence take up the slow movement of the piece. Apparently untroubled by any aftereffects of drinking, these lucky peasants rise again in the third movement to go hunting. The concerto concludes with a frantic chase through the woods, complete with horns and instrumental imitations of dogs barking.

"Winter" brings the listener to the end of the cycle of seasons with frigid winds and solo violins creating the sound of chattering teeth.

The slow movement depicts the comfort of the poet sitting inside by his hearth while the blizzard rages outside his window.

When the snowfall ceases, he leaves his cozy shelter to watch, what the third movement describes as, a comical scene of people slipping and sliding on the ice. A bit of the first movement of "Summer" reappears here, hinting at warmth to come. It doesn't stay too long, though, before the winds roar again, and "The Four Seasons" comes to a close.

Printed in 1725 in a collection of concertos Vivaldi titled "The Contest of Harmony and Invention," these four descriptive pieces achieved instant fame throughout Europe. The universal appeal of these pieces is self-evident as they remain equally popular today.

Following are notes about the score.
About The Score

"The Four Seasons" are based on sonnets which may have been written by Vivaldi himself or one of his librettists. The basso continuo was performed by the organ or harpsichord, together with a viola da gamba (an early string instrument held between the knees) or the cello. The figures under the staff indicate the intervals and chords to be played above the bass notes. The term *tasto solo* means "no accompaniment other than the bass note."

The tempo markings used in the four concertos follow:

Allegro means cheerful

Largo e pianissimo sempre means very slow in tempo, usually combined with great expressiveness and always very soft.

Allegro non molto means cheerful but not very.

Adagio means slow tempo, comfortable, easy.

Presto means very quick.

Larghetto means not as slow as largo.

Adagio molto means very slow tempo.

The sonnets on which these concertos are based are translated from the early Italian:

SPRING

Giunt' è la Primavera e festosetti
La salutano gli Augei con lieto canto,
Ei fonti allo spirar dè Zeffiretti
Con dolce mormorio scorrono intanto:

Spring has arrived and happily
The birds welcome it with cheerful song.
The springs flow with the gentle breeze,
Murmuring sweetly for the time being.

Vengon coprendo l'aer di nero amanto
E lampi, e tuoni ad annuntiarla eletti

Covering the air with a black cloak,
Lightning and thunder announce
the season

Indi, tacendo questi, gl' augelletti;
Tornan' di nuovo allor canoro incanto

Afterwards, the birds return
With new enchanting singing.

E quindi sul fiorito ameno prato

And then, on the blooming,
picturesque meadow

Al caro mormorio di fronde e piante

To the dear murmur of leafy
branches and vines,

Dorme 'l Caprar col fido canà lato.

Sleeps the goatherd, with his
faithful dog at his side.

Di pastoral zampogna al suon festante
Danzan ninfe e pastor nel tetto amato
Di primavera all'apparir brillante.

To festive sounds of the bagpipe
Dance nymphs and shepherds
Under the bright spring sky.

SUMMER

Sotto dura stagione dal sole accesa
Languie l'huom, languie 'l gregge,
ed arde il pino;
Scioglie il cucco la voce, e tosto intesa

During the season of the harsh sun
Man and his flocks languish,
the pine trees burn.

Canta la tortorella e 'l gardelino.

The cuckoo's voice frees itself and in
agreement
The turtledove and nightingale sing.

Zeffiro dolce spira, mà contesa
Muove Borea improvviso al suo vicino;
E piange il pastorel, perchè sospesa
Teme fiera borasca, e 'l suo destino;

The sweet light wind dies, challenged,
The north wind moves near;
The shepherd boy cries because
He fears the fierce storm and his
destiny;

Toglie alle membra lasse il suo riposo.
Il timore de' lampi, e tuoni fieri

E de mosche, e mossoni il stuol furioso!

Ah che pur troppo i suoi timor son veri,
Tuona e fulmina il ciel e grandinoso

Tronca il capo alle spiche e a' grani
alteri.

He stirs his tired limbs from rest.
For fear of lightning and fierce
thunder,

And of swarms of furious gnats and
flies!

Ah, his fear is too real,
Thunder and lightning fill the sky ,and
hail

Severs the heads of the wheat and
and grain.

AUTUMN

Celebra il vilanel con balli e canti

Del felice raccolto il bel piacere;

E del liquor di bacco accesi tanti
Finiscono col sonno illor godere.

Fà ch'ogn uno tralasci e balli e canti:
L'aria che temperata dà piacere,
E 'la staggion ch'invita tanti e tanti
D'un dolcissimo sonno al bel godere.

I cacciator alla nov'alba à caccia
Con corni, schioppi, e cani escono
fuore
Fugge la belva, e seguono la traccia;

Già sbigottita, e lassa al gran rumore

De' Schioppi e canni, ferita minaccia
Languida di fuggir,
mà oppressa muore.

The peasant celebrates with dances and
songs

The beautiful pleasure of a happy
harvest;

And with so much access to wine
They finish with an enjoyable sleep.

Everyone ceases the dances and songs:
The pleasant and gentle air,
And the season invites all
To the beautiful enjoyment of a sweet
sleep.

The hunter at dawn goes to the chase
With horns, guns and ferocious dogs.

The wild beast runs away, and they
follow the chase;

Already startled and worn out from the
great noise

Of guns and dogs, the wounded prey
Languishing from fleeing,
overwhelmed, dies.

WINTER

Aggiacciato tremar trà nevi argenti
Al severo spirar d'orrido vento,
Correr battendo i piedi ogni momento;

E pel soverchio gel batter i denti;

Trembling in the frozen snow
To the harsh breath of horrid wind,
Running, stamping the feet at every
moment;

The engulfing frost causing the teeth
to chatter;

Passar al foco i dì quieti e contenti
Mentre la pioggia fuor bagna ben cento
Caminar sopra 'l giaccio,
e à passo lento
Per timor di cader gersene intenti;

Gir forte sdruzziolar, cader à terra
Di nuovo ir sopra 'l giaccio,
e correr forte
Sin ch' il giaccio si rompe, e si disserra;

Sentir uscir dalle ferrate porte
Sirocco, Borea, e tutti i venti in guerra.

Quest' è 'l verno, mà tal,
che gioja apporte.

Resting calm and contented by the
fire
While the rain pours down
Walking on the ice, with a slow step

For fear of falling, going cautiously;

Whirling about, slipping, falling to the
ground
Once again on the ice, and running
strong
Until the ice cracks and breaks;

Bursting forth through the iron
portals
The winds from the east and north, are
all in conflict.

This, then, is winter, which brings
great joy.