

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
VIVALDI AND BACH WITH AVI AVITAL
A Jacobs Masterworks Rush Hour 2.0 Concert
Johannes Debus, conductor**

December 6, 2018

**HENRY PURCELL
Arr. Benjamin Britten**

Chacony in G minor

ANTONIO VIVALDI

“Winter” in F minor from *The Four Seasons*, Op. 8, RV 297

Aggiaciatto tremar tra nevi algenti

Passar al foco i di quieti

Camminar sopra il ghiacc

Avi Avital, mandolin

ANTON ARENSKY

Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky, Op. 35a

**J. S. BACH
Adapted for Mandolin
by Avi Avital**

**Concerto No. 1 in D minor, BWV 1052
(Originally for harpsicord)**

Allegro

Adagio

Allegro

Avi Avital, mandolin

Chacony in G minor (arr. B. Britten)

HENRY PURCELL

Born 1659, Westminster, London

Died November 21, 1695, Westminster, London

Known to American audiences primarily as the composer of the theme Benjamin Britten used in his *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, Henry Purcell is considered the first of England's great composers. Born into a musical family, he sang in the Chapel Royal as a boy, became "composer to the King's violins" at age 18, and was named the organist at Westminster Abbey in 1679, a position he held until his death in 1695 at the age of 36. A prolific composer, he wrote church music, coronation anthems, incidental music for London theatrical productions, and a large number of songs, instrumental compositions and keyboard pieces. His one opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, written for an amateur production at a girls' school in 1689, is regarded as the first great English opera.

Purcell's Chaconne in G minor (or "Chacony," as Purcell spelled it) dates from the 1680s, or roughly from the same time as Bach's birth. Originally published as the sixth of Purcell's Ten Sonatas in Four Parts, this music is not a sonata in the classical sense. (During this period "sonata" meant "sounded" and could refer to any purely instrumental composition.) The "four parts" here are first and second violins, viola, and a bass line that might consist of harpsichord, cello and double bass.

At this concert the "Chacony" is performed in an edition for string orchestra that Benjamin Britten prepared in 1948 and revised in 1963. This brief and impassioned work is in fact a strict chaconne, built on a set of variations over a repeating eight-bar ground bass; recent scholarship suggests that Purcell derived this bass line from the song *Scocca Pur* by his friend, the Italian composer Giovanni Battista Draghi. This ground bass is announced firmly at the beginning and repeats throughout. Above this chordal progression, Purcell gives the higher string voices a sequence of variations remarkable for their invention and their emotional power – this quite intense music. Purcell also stretches the harmonic language, so that while the Chaconne stays in G minor, it often implies G Major, with a great deal of resulting harmonic ambiguity.

“Winter” in F minor from *The Four Seasons*, Op. 8, RV 297

ANTONIO VIVALDI

Born March 4, 1678, Venice

Died July 26/27, 1741, Vienna

The Four Seasons are the first four concertos in the set of twelve Vivaldi published in 1725 as his Opus 8. Each of the four is a small tone poem depicting events of its respective season. *The Four Seasons* are thus one of the earliest examples of program music, but audiences should not expect the kind of detailed musical depiction of a composer like Richard Strauss. Strauss, who once said that his highest aim was to write fork music that could never be mistaken for a spoon, was a master at painting scenes with an orchestra. Vivaldi’s music, written nearly two centuries earlier, can seem a little innocent by comparison: his fast movements tend to depict storms, the slow movements shepherds falling asleep. But this music is so infectious and appealing, the many little touches so charming, that *The Four Seasons* seem to have an air of eternal freshness about them.

Each of the four is in the standard form of Vivaldi’s concertos. The first movement opens with a ritornello, or refrain, that will recur throughout the movement; between its appearances, the soloist breaks free with florid, virtuoso music of his own. The slow movement is usually a melodic interlude, while the finale – dynamic and extroverted – is sometimes cast in dance forms.

This concert offers the last of the four concertos, “Winter,” in an arrangement for mandolin and orchestra. The beginning of “Winter” is one of the most effective moments in *The Four Seasons*: quick turns in the orchestra “shiver” with the cold, and later vigorous “stamping” marks the effort to keep warm. In the wonderful *Largo*, a graceful, melodic line sings of the contented who sit inside before a warm fire while outside raindrops (pizzicato strings) fall steadily. In the concluding *Allegro*, the soloist depicts those trying desperately to walk over ice. The ice shatters and breaks and strong winds blow, but Vivaldi’s music concludes with a sort of fierce joy – this is weather that, however rough, brings pleasure.

Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky, Op. 35a

ANTON ARENSKY

Born July 12, 1861, Novgorod

Died February 25, 1906, Terioki, Finland

Despite the emotional torment of his own life, Tchaikovsky found time to be a generous colleague and champion of a generation of young Russian composers. His sudden death at age 53 was devastating to them, and two of the young composers he had befriended wrote music in his memory. The twenty-year-old Rachmaninoff composed his second *Trio élégiaque* and dedicated it to the memory of Tchaikovsky, while Anton Arensky – who was then a professor at the Moscow Conservatory – dedicated his String Quartet No. 2 to Tchaikovsky's memory.

Arensky paid tribute to the older composer in a specific way: the second movement of his quartet is a set of variations on a theme by Tchaikovsky. For this theme, Arensky turned to a song Tchaikovsky had written ten years earlier, in the fall of 1883, and which had become famous on its own: Tchaikovsky had published “Legend” (also known as “When Jesus Christ Was but a Little Child”) as the fifth of his Sixteen Children's Songs, Op. 54. In the song, Jesus as a boy plants a tree in his garden, and that tree eventually furnishes the thorns with which he is crowned at his crucifixion. The song became so popular that Tchaikovsky himself made arrangements of it for orchestra and for *a capella* chorus.

Recognizing the popularity of this movement in the quartet, Arensky quickly arranged it for string orchestra. The Variations on a Theme of Tchaikovsky, as he called the arrangement, became an instant success and has remained one of Arensky's most popular compositions. Tchaikovsky's somber little tune is heard immediately, and there follow seven variations. These might be described not so much as variations as “re-presentations” of Tchaikovsky's theme, because that tune reappears almost literally in every variation: Arensky's general method is to repeat the theme and change only its speed or coloring. The exception to this is the seventh variation, for here Arensky plays the theme backwards – he claimed that this was in imitation of military funerals, where guns are held upside down. A brief coda recalls bits of the original theme as the music draws to its quiet close.

Concerto No. 1 in D minor, BWV 1052
(Originally for harpsicord, adapted for mandolin by A. Avital)

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach

Died July 28, 1750, Leipzig

In April 1729 Bach made a significant change in his musical life. After six exhausting years as cantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig – during which he had composed cantatas, oratorios and passions for religious observances – Bach was named director of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum. The Collegium Musicum corresponded somewhat to the modern university-community symphony orchestra: it was an ensemble of student, amateur and professional instrumentalists who rehearsed weekly and performed orchestral music. The orchestra gave public concerts on Wednesday afternoons from 4 to 6 in a coffee-garden called Grimmische's Thor during the warm months and inside Zimmerman's coffee-house on Friday evenings from 8 to 10 during the winter. After six years of having to produce a new cantata almost every week, Bach was doubtless glad to put his responsibilities for church music behind him and turn to the quite different pleasures of secular music.

Bach was responsible for choosing the music the Collegium Musicum performed, and he quickly discovered that he needed new keyboard concertos, probably for his talented sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel to perform with the orchestra. He turned to his library and recycled eight concertos he had written much earlier – often for other instruments – by arranging them as keyboard concertos for the Collegium. The Concerto in D minor (BWV 1052) is one of the works Bach transcribed from an earlier version, and evidence suggests that in its original version this concerto was for violin and may have been written as early as Bach's tenure as organist in Weimar (1708-17) or while he music director in Cöthen (1717-23).

It is heard on this program in an arrangement for mandolin and orchestra by the soloist, Avi Avital. The *Allegro* bursts to life with a hard-edged *ritornello* that will be tossed antiphonally between the violin sections over the span of this movement. The soloist makes a distinctive entrance with a passage full of characteristic 32nd-note runs, and listeners will recognize in that part a number of figurations that suggest this music's origin as a violin concerto. Bach was no believer in virtuosity for its own sake, but at the center of this movement he does write out what amounts to a cadenza for the soloist – a series of brilliant runs – and provides further solo passages before the movement comes to its close on a firm reprise of the *ritornello*. The expressive *Adagio* moves to G minor, and Bach opens with a long introduction for the orchestra in octaves before the soloist enters with quite different music – disconsolate and

intricate – that is eventually taken up by the orchestra. The concluding *Allegro* returns to D minor. Its *ritornello* is full of energy, while the solo passages encompass a wide range of expression – sometimes powerful, sometimes delicate. Bach brings matters to a pause with a brief *Adagio* before the *ritornello* leaps up to thrust the movement to its animated cadence.

-Program notes by Eric Bromberger

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

By Dr. Melvin G Goldzband, San Diego Symphony Archivist

Benjamin Britten's orchestration of the *Chacony* by Purcell is being offered at these concerts for the first time. Arensky's *Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky* is being offered just the second time, after its SDSO debut in the 2013-14 season under the baton of Jahja Ling. Varied selections from Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* have been heard several times at these concerts but never before played by a mandolinist. (In fact, the most recent mandolinist featured on these concerts was a very young Chris Thile, NPR's current *Live from Here* host, performing a different Vivaldi concerto in January 2001.)