SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
“VIVALDI AND PIAZZOLLA: FOUR SEASONS”
A CLASSICAL SPECIAL CONCERT
Christopher Dragon, conductor
Elena Urioste, violin

March 20 (JMC) and 22 (RSF), 2020

ANTONIO VIVALDI  
La primavera (Spring) in E Major  
from Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons), Op. 8, RV 269  
Allegro  
Largo e pianissimo  
Allegro

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA / Arr. L. Desyatnikov  
"Verano porteño" (Summer) from Las cuatro estaciones porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)

ANTONIO VIVALDI  
L'estate (Summer) in G minor  
from Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons), Op. 8, RV 315  
Allegro ma non molto  
Adagio  
Presto

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA / Arr. L. Desyatnikov  
"Otoño porteño" (Autumn) from Las cuatro estaciones porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)

- - Intermission - -

ANTONIO VIVALDI  
L'autunno (Autumn) in F Major  
from Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons), Op. 8, RV 293  
Allegro  
Adagio molto  
Allegro

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA / Arr. L. Desyatnikov  
"Invierno porteño" (Winter) from Las cuatro estaciones porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)

ANTONIO VIVALDI  
L'inverno (Winter) in F minor  
from Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons), Op. 8, RV 297  
Allegro non molto  
Largo  
Allegro

ASTOR PIAZZOLLA / Arr. L. Desyatnikov  
"Primavera porteña" (Spring) from Las cuatro estaciones porteñas (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)
The Four Seasons, one of the most familiar works of classical music today, was almost unknown when Louis Kaufman, a Portland-born violinist, recorded these four concertos in Carnegie Hall during the last two days of 1947—finishing up before midnight on New Year’s Eve in order to avoid a musicians’ strike. The concertmaster for more than four hundred soundtrack recordings, including Gone with the Wind and Casablanca, Kaufman had a knack for getting in on the ground floor of popular trends: two decades earlier, he was the first person to buy a painting by American master Milton Avery—he paid just $25. Kaufman’s recording of The Four Seasons, which quickly became a best seller, coincided with a renewed interest in Vivaldi in scholarly circles as well: the Italian publishing house of Ricordi launched the complete edition of Vivaldi’s instrumental works in 1947; Marc Pincherle’s definitive study was published the next year. Soon, just as Avery’s paintings had begun to command big prices, the Vivaldi revival was in full swing. (The Chicago Symphony Orchestra programmed The Four Seasons for the first time in 1955.)

The Four Seasons eventually became the most frequently recorded piece of music in the repertory, as well as a ubiquitous background presence in upscale hotel lobbies, gourmet food shops, and coffee bars; and a ridiculously overplayed selection in soundtracks for movies (Pretty Woman, I, Tonya) and TV series (The Sopranos, The Crown). (Vivaldi himself was the subject of a film starring Joseph Fiennes, who played Shakespeare in Shakespeare in Love, as the composer.) For a work that has so thoroughly infiltrated the public consciousness, however, we know surprisingly little about its origins.

The four violin concertos we know as The Four Seasons were first published in Amsterdam in 1725, in a collection of twelve concertos entitled II cimento dell’armonia e dell’inventione (The contest between harmony and invention), which was Vivaldi’s op. 8. But apparently The Four Seasons wasn’t new: in his dedication to Count Wenzel Morzin, Vivaldi explains that he has included these four concertos, which “found generous favor with Your Illustrious Lordship quite a long time ago,” in an improved version, complete with illustrative sonnets. It’s unclear when Vivaldi wrote the concertos, and whether it was he who played them for Morzin originally. The
1725 edition includes not only four sonnets, one per season, that were most likely written by Vivaldi himself, but also cue letters and descriptive captions printed directly in the score that link lines of the poems with their musical realization.

It is the scene painting in these concertos that has caused the most comment in our time, as it surely must have in Vivaldi’s. For, although there is a strong tradition of Italian program music before Vivaldi, The Four Seasons stands alone in the abundance, brilliance, and ingenuity of its pictorial writing: birds chirp, leaves rustle, thunder rattles, a dog barks, winds howl. There is nothing quite like it in music again until Beethoven’s nightingale, quail, and cuckoo begin to sing in the Pastoral Symphony. As Beethoven says, writing nearly a century later, “Even without description one will recognize the whole,” although in Vivaldi’s concertos, there is a strict correspondence between the explanatory poems and the music; each sonnet is a blow-by-blow summary of the action—the first few lines outlining the first movement, as little as a single line setting the scene for the slow movement, and the rest of the poem describing the finale. (On a recent CD, a mezzo-soprano actually sings lines from Vivaldi’s sonnets to the appropriate sections of the music, her voice essentially replacing the solo violin.) Vivaldi’s sonnets, are, in essence, the first true program notes in the history of music—a hundred years before the ever-innovative Berlioz couldn’t make up his mind whether listeners needed to read his commentary on the Symphonie fantastique. Vivaldi wasn’t ambivalent: he wanted Count Morzin to read the sonnets and listen to his music.

—Phillip Huscher

The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires (Arranged by Leonid Desyatnikov)

Astor Piazzolla
Born March 11, 1921; Mar del Plata, Argentina
Died July 5 1992; Buenos Aires, Argentina

Astor Piazzolla’s eclectic background brought numerous influences to his unique music. His parents were Italian immigrants to Argentina, and although he was born in the coastal resort city of Mar del Plata in 1921, he spent fifteen years growing up in New York City before the family returned to Argentina. It was during this time in New York that Piazzolla learned his signature instrument, the bandoneón, which is closely related to the accordion. Also in New York, he met tango musician and bandleader Carlos Gardel and studied music with Bela Wilda, a student of Rachmaninov. By the time the teenaged Piazzolla returned to
Argentina, he was already synthesizing such diverse traditions as classical music and the Argentine tango—with jazz to enter later as another major influence.

From 1941 until 1946, while earning a living playing in tango clubs, he continued his studies, now with composer Alberto Ginastera. There was no doubt that Piazzolla was preparing for a career in classical composition. In 1954, he traveled with his wife to Paris on an Argentine government grant in order to study with renowned pedagogue Nadia Boulanger. Piazzolla presented himself to Boulanger as a classically oriented composition student, making no mention of his experience with tango or mastery of the bandoneón. However, his early student compositions were undistinguished, derivative efforts. When he finally played one of his tangos for Boulanger, it was clear to both of them that his future lay in reinventing the genre. At this same time in Paris, Piazzolla heard American jazz baritone saxophonist Gerry Mulligan and his octet. The experience led Piazzolla to break with tradition and form his own tango octet, which incorporated jazz improvisation and intricately composed counterpoint, along the lines he had mastered in his studies with Boulanger. This laid the groundwork for nuevo tango (new tango), the movement with which he is most closely associated.

In Argentina, tango was considered primarily dance music. A traditional tango band (orquesta típica) had a core of six instruments: two violins, two bandoneóns, a piano, and bass. These groups often included a singer and occasionally a flute or acoustic guitar. To this traditional instrumentation, Piazzolla’s 1955 Octeto Buenos Aires added electric guitar and cello. Following the lead of modern jazz combos, the Octeto’s music was intended for serious listening, rather than merely an accompaniment to dancers. The approach was praised in America and Europe, but proved controversial in Argentina, and the Octeto never succeeded financially. Although Piazzolla had found his musical formula and pursued its development, he still struggled to earn a living.

In 1960, he formed his first quintet—the configuration he preferred most—of bandoneón, violin, electric guitar, piano, and bass. Composition of The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires began five years later, in 1965, with Summer, which Piazzolla wrote for Alberto Rodríguez Muñoz’s play Melenita de oro (Golden hair). Autumn followed in 1969, with both Spring and Winter written in 1970. It wasn’t Piazzolla’s intention to create a suite that paralleled Vivaldi’s Four Seasons, since each piece was written for his Tango Nuevo Quintet, and not for a conventional orchestra. Occasionally, his group performed the four works together, but it was not until various
ensembles began to perform arrangements of the pieces that the collective title of *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* drew a connection to Vivaldi’s group of eighteenth-century violin concertos.

In the late 1990s, Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer collaborated with Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov on several projects, including a reconceptualization and arrangement of Piazzolla’s *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* as pieces for solo violin and orchestra in a way that unequivocally linked them to Vivaldi’s work. Gone are the bandoneón and electric guitar of Piazzolla’s original version. Desyatnikov purposely associates Piazzolla’s southern hemisphere seasons with those that would be occurring simultaneously in Vivaldi’s Italy. For instance, in January it’s summer in Argentina while it’s winter in Italy. Thus, the pieces are linked in that relative way: summer-winter, fall-spring.

The Piazzolla/Desyatnikov recording project of arrangements by Kremer and his Kremerata Baltica chamber orchestra, entitled *Eight Seasons*, alternates these opposite seasons with Vivaldi’s originals. Desyatnikov further reinforces these cross-hemisphere associations by including quotations from Vivaldi’s works in his arrangements of Piazzolla’s. Therefore, listeners should be alert to quotes from Vivaldi’s summer in Piazzolla’s winter, and so on. Desyatnikov also continues Piazzolla’s usage of *col legno* (Italian for “with the wood”) techniques in the strings, where the players use the wooden surfaces of their bows to create percussive sounds, greatly expanding the role of the strings in the music. Finally, Desyatnikov creates ample opportunities for the violin soloist to shine as brightly and as expressively as in Vivaldi’s work, thereby making the works of both composers logical program companions.

—*Joseph C. Schiavo and Eric Polack*

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