Program Page

HOUGH FAMILY FOUNDATION MASTERWORKS

Vivaldi's The Four Seasons

Jeffrey Multer, *Violin and Leader*

Friday, Apr 4, 2025, Centro Asturiano, Tampa at 8 pm
Saturday, Apr 5, 2025, Mahaffey Theater at 8 pm

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Symphony No. 39 in E-flat Major, K.543
I. Adagio – Allegro
II. Andante con moto
III. Menuetto: Allegretto
IV. Allegro

Intermission

Antonio Vivaldi
(1678-1741)

The Four Seasons, Op. 8
I. *La primavera* (Spring)
II. *L'estate* (Summer)
III. *L'autunno* (Autumn)
IV. *L'inverno* (Winter)

The Florida Orchestra dedicates Saturday's performance with gratitude to generous patron and donor Ann Waterhouse.

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Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, (1756-1791)
Symphony No. 39 in E Flat Major, K. 543

Duration: ca. 29 minutes

What to listen for:

- The symphony is scored for flute; pairs of clarinets, bassoons, horns and trumpets; strings; and timpani. So, what's missing? Oboes. This gives the clarinets a more prominent role and creates a slightly different tone color compared to Mozart's previous symphonies.

What can be said of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart that hasn't been said a thousand times over? So much has been written about this precocious wonder of music − the effortless style of many of his 626 compositions; the perfection of his operas, late symphonies and piano concertos; and the ominous torso of the *Requiem* − that anything more seems redundant.

We can all agree, however, that Mozart was an innate musician who created art with uncanny ease and profound humanity. His vulnerability also reminds us that he was not a musical god, but a mortal.

But what mortal could have conceived of the three flawless works that close his chapter as a symphonist? Completed in just six weeks in the summer of 1788, the symphonies *39, 40* and *41* together form Mozart's crowning orchestral achievement, works of intense emotional expression and contrapuntal brilliance.

They are not based on a program or literary idea, much less the celebration of some important occasion. Even more surprising, no evidence exists of a commission, which Mozart so desperately relied on all his life. Experts believe he wrote these works simply to please himself, hardly imagining they would symbolize, in the words of George Bernard Shaw, "the last word of the 18th century."

The *Symphony No. 39* is often overshadowed by the others in the trio, but it remains a glory of the repertoire, especially the opening movement. The work brings together much of what Mozart learned and developed up to the time, including structural balance and proportion, a vibrant harmonic language and rich orchestral textures.

The symphony opens in a slow but grand manner, almost like an overture to an opera – it mirrors that of *The Magic Flute* − and the mellifluous rise and fall of the strings as they bridge the introduction to the allegro remains one of the marvels of music. Consider an eyewitness account by a writer named Iwan Anderwitsch, who attended a performance in March 1792 in Hamburg:

"The opening is so majestic that it so surprised even the coldest, most insensitive listener and non-expert, that even if he wanted to chat, it prevented him from being inattentive. It then becomes fiery, full, ineffably grand and rich in ideas, with striking variety in almost all obbligato parts, that it is nearly impossible to follow so rapidly with ear and feeling, and one is nearly paralyzed.''

The second movement resides in the warm key of A flat major, and its quiet and compact structure may have inspired Beethoven in writing the same section of his iconic *Fifth Symphony*. Mozart follows with a jovial menuetto, its rhythmic pulse bouncing back and forth in the style of an Austrian ländler dance, and the clarinets clearly enjoy their role without having to rub elbows with oboes (Mozart omitted them from the score). The finale borrows a single theme from the symphony's opening and runs it through a cycle of different keys before it reappears in an irrepressible romp until the end.

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)
The Four Seasons, Op. 8

Duration: ca. 37 minutes

What to listen for:

- Vivaldi presents a musical travelogue of spring, summer, autumn and winter, complete with bird songs, shimmering creeks, a thunderstorm, peasant's dance and a freezing ice storm.

Give Antonio Vivaldi credit: He wasn't a slacker. He cranked out music at an amazing rate, and not just instrumental pieces. In the last few decades, scholars have revived some of his nearly 50 operas, the best of which reveal both a flair for the human voice and treatment of the orchestra as more than an ornament for singers. More importantly, he helped lay the foundation for the Baroque concerto, and in doing so enhanced the technique and repertoire of his chosen instrument, the violin.

Known as the "red priest" because of his crimson hair, Vivaldi taught violin at the Pio Ospedale della Pieta convent for orphaned girls in Venice, where he composed fluidly over more than 35 years, bringing to life many of his 230 violin concertos and some 250 works for other instruments. The rap on Vivaldi is that he wrote one concerto 500 times; but close listening to the variety of his concertos, sacred works, chamber pieces and operas reveals something else: a wellspring of dynamic shades and colors, nervous energy and fervent melody.

These qualities shine in his most enduring work, *Le Quattro Stagioni – The Four Seasons* – the first four concertos from a book of 12 published in 1725 that Vivaldi called "contests between harmony and invention.'' The score was forgotten for nearly two centuries until the discovery of a large cache of Vivaldi's music at a boarding school in Italy. In 1942, violinist Louis Kaufmann and the New York Philharmonic made the first recording of *Seasons*, leading to a flood of albums that helped ignite the Baroque craze. Today, nearly 1,000 recordings of the work have been made.

Vivaldi's influence lies in almost single-handedly inventing the three-movement Italian-style concerto: a rhythmic opening section, an arioso-like slow movement and an animated close. As a virtuoso violinist, he expanded the possibilities of the instrument but as a composer he created pictorialism from otherwise abstract music, so elegantly realized in his trademark composition.

Vivaldi cast his vision of spring, summer, autumn and winter in contrasting keys: E major, G minor, F major and F minor, respectively. Essentially four violin concertos, the work suggests the changing seasons and evokes the bucolic sentiment of the original sonnets printed for the first concerts (most today avoid these poetic references).

The music announces *Spring* with brisk tempos, bird songs and a shimmering creek, music borrowed from the Sinfonia from the composer's opera, *Il Giustino*. Then, *Summer* arrives under a hot sun, a peasant's dance and thunderstorm. *Autumn* celebrates the harvest, drinking and hunting, and finally, *Winter* takes listeners full circle with the shivering musical figures of an ice storm.

"Bringing Vivaldi's incredible tone painting to life is the challenge,'' said Concertmaster Jeff Multer, the featured soloist in TFO's upcoming performances. "The violin writing is quite brilliant and demanding, as is the work the group of musicians must accomplish together. With all great masterpieces, the balance is to bring a fresh take to it without sounding like you are trying to reinvent the wheel.''

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a journalist and arts writer who has covered classical music in Florida for more than 40 years. A member of the Music Critics Association of North America, he lives in St. Petersburg.