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## REVIEW

### Antonio VIVALDI (1678-1741) *The Four Seasons*

Concerto for Strings in g minor, RV156 [5:57]  
Concerto in E (Spring) RV269 [9:35]  
Concerto in g minor (Summer) RV315 [10:41]  
*Sinfonia Al Santo Sepolcro* in b minor, RV169 [4:43]  
Concerto in F (Autumn) RV293 [11:01]  
Concerto in f minor (Winter) RV297 [9:10]  
Concerto Köln/Shunsuke Sato (violin)  
rec. live Kempen, Germany, 25-26 June 2016. DDD  
**BERLIN CLASSICS** 03008290C [51:07]  
Also available on vinyl LP 03008308C.

300+ recordings and still they come. Surprisingly, the best have something new to offer, so that I might well have headed this review *The changing Seasons*. You can have them on modern instruments or period instruments and they come coupled with more Vivaldi, often the rest of the Op.8 set, or with Astor Piazzolla's *Cuarto Estaciones*, Vivaldi with an Argentinian accent, and more recently with Roxanna Panufnik's *Four World Seasons* – review – review.

I had only just praised Federico Guglielmo and L'Arte dell'Arco on Brilliant Classics as challenging and in some respects surpassing my previous top choices on period instruments when new recordings started to pop up. Let me say at once that for their combination of performance and value for money Guglielmo and his team are not displaced by any of the newer rivals: their 2-CD set of the complete Op.8, not just the *Seasons*, comes on two super-budget CDs – Recording of the Month. Their complete box of Op.1 – Op.12 is even better value – review – and Brilliant Classics' bumper Vivaldi box better value still – review. Even the less well-known concertos of Op.11 and Op.12 come to life in their hands, either in the complete set or on the 2-CD version which I recently praised – review.

The new recording from Concerto Köln goes further than most historically-informed performances: the booklet compares the effect to a community sprucing up a neglected playground with screwdrivers and a lick of paint, then relaxing afterwards to juice and – it has to be a German scene – *Wurstchen*. To extend the analogy, Shunsuke Sato and his team interpret their task as including the freedom to improvise – to add a bit of extra furniture to the playground, as it were.

I'm pleased that the two additional works were not placed after the *Seasons*, though I'm not sure why *Al Santo sepolcro* is inserted between *Summer* and *Autumn*. If it goes anywhere chronologically it's with *Spring*, since it refers to the liturgy of Holy Week when the Eucharistic Host was symbolically 'buried' until Easter Day. It's often included with performances of the *Stabat Mater* and other Passiontide music. Sombre music it may be, but steer clear of the overblown monster which Herbert von Karajan makes of it (DG 423262, download only).

In the opening concerto, RV156, honours are about even with my benchmark from Concerto Italiano and Rinaldo Alessandrini (*Concerti per archi*, Naive OP30377, download only: Download News 2013/11). There is another recording with a similar title, *Concerti per archi e continuo*, on Tactus TC672259. Performed by L'Arcicembalo, I had overlooked it until I came across Johann van Veen's review and downloaded it in lossless sound, with pdf booklet, from edclassical.com. It contains an account of RV156 to rival – and even surpass – Alessandrini and Sato and an enticing selection of other concertos very well performed.

In the first two movements of *Spring* there are no surprises, for good or ill. The shepherd's dog, who all too often gets left out of the picture is audibly apparent in the slow movement. In the third movement, however, the normal accentuation is not observed. The result is to continue the drowsy mood of the slow movement: not as unpleasant as Nigel Kennedy's truly awful re-imagining of the music – review – and it exemplifies the claim that there is always something new in these performances, but it takes some getting used to. Guglielmo, though only very marginally faster, gives us what it says on the label: *Danza pastorale*.

The first movement of *Summer* comes in quietly, too, with more emphasis on the second half of the marking *allegro non molto*; though that is effective in adding contrast when the music becomes agitated, this is a milder *Summer* than usual. In the finale, however, there's a real success in capturing the *Tempo impetuoso d'Estate*.

The first movement of *Autumn* receives a few violin embellishments before the music seems to fall apart as if the *villanelli* are drunk on the fruits of the season, perhaps inspired by Brueghel's painting of a peasant quaffing from a huge flagon while resting from mowing. Interesting once, but not, I suspect on repeated hearing. The hunt in the finale goes with a swing, albeit with a few modifications from the soloist and his team.

There are plenty of embellishments in the *Winter* concerto, too, not all of which I found helpful in imagining the *Kulka* as a soloist capturing the mood of *Winter* very well. His 1951 mono version reassured me the Academy of St Martin and Neville Marriner, my clear favourite among modern-instrument performances (Decca Originals 475531, mid-price). You really hear the rain and melting ice dripping from the eaves in the slow movement, an image obscured to some extent by the free interpretation on the new recording.

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Almost simultaneously with the Concerto Köln, another recording has emerged entitled *The Folk Seasons*, a download-only recording from Kreetla Maria Kantala (violin), Andrew Lawrence-King (harp). Siiri Virkkälä (violin) and Barocco Boreale. As well as the *Four Seasons* [11:20 + 11:26 + 12:59 + 9:33] we are offered a Concerto for Strings in C, RV114 [8:56], the Concerto for two violins in a minor, Op.3/8, RV522 [10:48], and another Concerto for two violins, RV511 [14:13]. (*Alba ABCD402* [79:15]). I listened to the 24-bit download from edclassical.com and the streamed version from Naxos Music Library; it's also available to download from Presto.

There are no notes with any version that I can find but the concept behind the recording is a re-imagining of the music in period performances to depict the Finnish weather, from winter storms to midsummer midnight sun. The performances are, in fact, fairly conventional but with certain features of the music underlined. In the first movement of *Spring*, for example, we are treated to birdsong. Of course birdsong is an essential accompaniment to Springtime anywhere, whether in Italy or in Finland: one of the best-known medieval English poems celebrates that 'Lenten ys come with love to toun / With bloemen art with brides rouge'. [Spring has arrived with blossom and with birdsong]. The birdsong is already there in Vivaldi's score, however, in the plucked strings and to add the warbling sounds is to emphasise the obvious. In the finale of *Spring*, too, we are treated to a kind of dance bass from what sounds like a hurdy-gurdy, presumably to remind us that these are peasants dancing. That's already inherent in the music and in the direction *danza pastorale*, but I must admit that the performance got my feet tapping.

The hurdy-gurdy appears again in *Summer* and there are one or two cases of underlining the obvious in the other seasons but on the whole I found this a refreshing approach to a much-loved and much-recorded work. With a few small and useful annotations and some ideas to underline the rhythm this *Winter* adds up to as chilly a picture of the season as you might hope, though the dripping rain and melting icicles in the second movement seem to have turned into skaters on the ice. The finale is slower than most – slower even than Münchinger 1973 – and a trifle cumbersome.

The additional concertos are well performed but I would rather they had been placed first and most Vivaldi lovers will already have a complete recording of the Op.3 set, *L'Estro armonico*, for example on the Alessandrini 4-CD set listed above or the Academy of St Martin on a budget Double Decca (E4434762, 2 CDs).

As I was writing this review I chanced to hear Max Richter's 'recomposed' version of *Spring* with Daniel Hope as soloist. I expected to be irritated beyond measure but I found myself fascinated by it and went on to stream the whole album, with pdf booklet, from Naxos Music Library. Since it was reviewed by Dominy Clements it's been reissued, still at full price but with some extra music and remixes (DG 4792777) and also on CD + concert DVD (DG 4792776). There's even a vinyl edition (4793337). I'm not sure how often I shall want to return to this – some of the omissions in *Autumn*, for example, are annoying – but the eeriness of the slow movement of *Winter* makes up with a picture of desolation to match *Der Leiermann* at the end of *Winterreise*. Do try to hear it at least once.

I enjoyed hearing both Concerto Köln and Barocco Boreale in the original and Max Richter's re-imagined version but the next time I want to hear *The Four Seasons* it's likely still to be a choice from Neville Marriner (Decca), Rinaldo Alessandrini (Erato) and Federico Guglielmo (Brilliant Classics).

Brían Wilson

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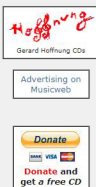


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