

**Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)****Le Quattro Stagioni (The Four Seasons) - Concertos Op. 8, Nos. 1**

*Vivaldi published his Op. 8 concertos in 1725, though they were probably written a decade or more earlier.*

**Background**

Antonio Vivaldi, born in Venice and nicknamed the “Red Priest,” was the most prominent and influential Italian composer of his generation. He composed in nearly every genre: over 500 concertos, some two dozen operas, nearly 100 chamber works, and dozens of Latin sacred pieces. He spent most of his life in Venice, but maintained connections with patrons and business partners throughout Europe. Aside from the operas, the vast majority of his works were written for use at the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, the girl’s orphanage in Venice where he spent most of his career. All four of Venice’s ospedali (charitable hospices) had large musical establishments in the early 18th century, but the chorus and orchestra he directed at the Pietà must have been particularly good, to judge by Vivaldi’s virtuoso concertos and fine sacred pieces. Many of his concertos were written to feature either the students themselves (as in a series of bassoon concertos written for one particularly talented young woman) or the other professional musicians associated with the school. His solo violin concertos—over 230 in all—were probably intended to feature Vivaldi himself, a virtuoso violinist with a high reputation among his contemporaries.

Vivaldi’s concertos were widely circulated and imitated in his day, and it was he who set many of the standard operating procedures followed by his contemporaries Bach, Handel, and Telemann in their concerto writing. Though his works were passed around Europe in handwritten copies, they were also well known in a series of printed collections, mostly published by his business partners in Amsterdam. Vivaldi’s Opus 8 collection of 1725 was given the fanciful title *Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’invenzione* (“The contest between harmony and invention”) and dedicated to a Bohemian patron named Wenzel von Morzin. The first four concertos of *Il cimento* are collectively known as *The Four Seasons*. Each is given a descriptive title: *La Primavera* (Spring), *L’Estate* (Summer), *L’Autunno* (Autumn), and *L’Inverno* (Winter). Programmatic titles like this were not unusual for Vivaldi, but here he goes a step further, publishing sonnets with each concerto that describe the action of each season. And, as if you could miss the point, the sonnets also provide cues to specific measures in the music. Vivaldi himself may have been responsible for these poems.

Though they were published in 1725, it is likely that the concertos of *The Four Seasons* were as much as ten years older than that. According to author Paul Everett, Vivaldi was interested in the idea of “programmatic” concertos in the middle 1710s, when he probably composed *The Four Seasons* and the other titled concertos that appear in *Il cimento*. Though he had obviously shared them with his Bohemian patron, he also wished to publish them for a wider audience and assembled *The Four Seasons* and twenty other concertos in about 1720. Due to unforeseen

problems that still remain a mystery, they were not published until five years later. The concertos of *The Four Seasons* were international hits even in Vivaldi's lifetime. They were well-known in Germany, and there are copies of the concertos in England and in France, where King Louis XV and other members of the royal court heard a performance of *Spring* in 1730. *The Four Seasons* is an even bigger hit today—arguably the single most familiar piece of Baroque music, and it remains Vivaldi's most popular work. Since the first complete 78-RPM records of the concertos in 1942, there have been—by conservative estimate—well over 300 recordings.

### **What You'll Hear**

Aside from the striking musical images suggested by the sonnets, the music of the concertos is fairly typical, matching the style of the many other solo violin concertos by Vivaldi: they place a solo violin part in contrast to a small string orchestra. Typically, he sets the concertos in three movements, fast-slow-fast. The outer fast movements have the typical alteration of ritornellos — passages for the entire ensemble — and flashier solo sections. Slow movements are generally more vocal in style, emulating the showy arias of contemporary Italian opera. But it is the wonderfully programmatic aspects of the concertos of *The Four Seasons* that make them so attractive.

### **Concerto in E Major, "Spring," Op. 8, No. 1, RV 269**

Undoubtedly the most familiar of this very familiar set, *Spring* begins with a ritornello that announces the arrival of the goddess Springtime. The first solo episode, for the birds, is an appropriately chirpy passage. There is a thunderstorm and murmuring brooks in subsequent solo episodes. The *Largo* has some of the most evocative music in the set, with the orchestra playing the role of gently shifting foliage, and the viola plays the role of the goatherd's dog throughout, insistently barking as the solo violin plays a lyrical melody. (One of my favorite memories from a long-ago Music History class is of my rather dignified professor playing a recording in class and solemnly intoning "bow-wow" along with the violas!) The final *Allegro* is clearly pastoral in nature, with long-held notes in the low strings filling in for bagpipes, and a rather serious peasant dance. Flashier episodes for two solo violins intrude, but the music always returns to the dance.

La Primavera (Spring)

I. Allegro

Springtime has arrived, and merrily  
the birds salute her with happy songs,  
and at the same time, at the breath of Zephyrus,  
the brooks flow with a gentle murmuring voice.

The sky is covered with a dark mantle  
and thunder and lightning are elected to announce her;  
when they are silenced,  
the little birds take up their harmonious songs anew.



II. Largo

And so, in the meadow, strewn with flowers,  
to the welcome murmuring of leaves and trees,  
the goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog beside him.

III. Allegro

To a rustic bagpipe, making a festive sound,  
nymphs and shepherds dance in their favorite spot,  
when Springtime appears in her brilliance.