Antonio Vivaldi

The Four Seasons, “Winter,” first movement

Composed: 1720

This work for solo violin and string orchestra portrays, through sound alone, the season of winter. It follows the outline of a brief text (probably by Vivaldi himself) that describes ice, snow, wind, stamping feet, and chattering teeth.

Contrasting Timbres

A concerto is an instrumental work for a soloist (or sometimes more than one soloist) and a larger ensemble. This particular concerto is for a solo violin and an orchestra of stringed instruments, plus basso continuo. It is the last of four concertos for this same combination of instruments that Vivaldi designated collectively as The Four Seasons. Although each of these concertos—“Spring,” “Summer,” “Fall,” and “Winter”—stands on its own, the four together represent the cycle of the seasons, a favorite theme of painters and poets alike. “Winter,” like most other concertos of its time, consists of three movements in the sequence fast-slow-fast. The movement here is the first of the three.
flamboyant. Both as a composer and as a player, Vivaldi took the art of virtuoso violin playing to new levels. He worked in a time and a place—early eighteenth-century northern Italy—in which violin making and violin playing were at their very peak: to this day, the best violins such as those made by Antonio Stradavari or “Stradivarius” (the Latinized form of his name) are from that time. How the great violin makers produced their instruments is not entirely known to us today, but the features of the violin basically remain the same (see A Closer Look: The Violin, page 000).

The appeal of the concerto’s contrasting timbres and its inherent virtuosity lasted beyond the Baroque period and into the present day. The concerto has undergone changes over the centuries but remains a popular genre among composers and audiences alike. Many modern symphony orchestra concert programs feature a concerto—from the Baroque or from a later period—and Vivaldi’s masterful opposition of solo and large-group string timbres has given The Four Seasons lasting fame.

Form: The Ritornello Principle

This movement consists of a series of alternating sections between the orchestra (also known as the tutti, Italian for “all”) and the soloist. Each statement and return of the full ensemble is known as the ritornello (Italian for “little [i.e., brief] return”). This formal design of alternating ritornello and solo sections is known as the ritornello principle and is basic to almost all concerto movements of the Baroque Era. The form of this movement, based on the ritornello principle, can be represented graphically in this way:

| Ritornello 1 | Solo 1 | Ritornello 2 | Solo 2 | Ritornello 3 | Solo 3 | Ritornello 4 |

The form of the movement is also structured around large-scale changes of key area. A key area is a set of harmonies that all have a distinctive relationship to one particular note, known as the tonic. At the beginning and end of this movement, that tonic note is F, and because the mode is minor, this central key area is called “F minor.” F minor acts as the “home” key, and it is by definition the key in which the movement begins and ends. (If it closed in a different key, the ending would not sound as conclusive.) But if the entire movement were in a single key, it would sound monotonous, and so Vivaldi moves the music to key areas other than the tonic—including some in the major mode. These other key areas provide a sense of harmonic variety.

The ritornello principle is found not only in concertos, but in almost every Baroque work that contrasts a soloist or group of soloists against a larger ensemble. Operatic arias, for example, routinely open with an instrumental ritornello (Ritornello 1), followed by the entrance of the voice (Solo 1), a brief return of the orchestra without the voice (Ritornello 2), a reentry of the voice (Solo 2), and so on. Composers and audiences of the Baroque relished the sound of contrasting forces, and the ritornello principle provided the perfect means by which to present such contrasts.
Word-Music Relationships: Program Music

The form of this particular concerto is also shaped by its relationship to a poem ("Winter") that Vivaldi appended to the first publication of the score in 1725. He indicated quite precisely which lines of the following poem corresponded to specific points of the concerto. This concerto is thus an example of program music, an instrumental work that is in some way associated with a story, event, or idea. A composer can indicate such connections by a suggestive title, a prose or poetic narrative, or both. A listener may choose to listen to the piece with the program in mind—in the case of Vivaldi’s “Winter,” hearing the strings shaking as if with cold in Ritornello 1, a stamping of feet in Ritornello 2, and a chattering sound in the Solo 3—or simply listen to the piece as music that does not represent anything besides itself. Indeed, some composers (for example, Berlioz—see chapter 30), have gone back and forth about whether their audiences should be aware of a program or simply be allowed to hear the music as it unfolds.

“Winter”

First movement: To tremble from cold in the icy snow
In the harsh breath of a horrid wind
To run, stamping our feet every moment
Our teeth chattering in the extreme cold.

Second movement: Before the fire to pass peaceful, contented days,
While the rain outside pours down.

Third movement: To walk on the ice and, at a slow pace
For fear of falling, move carefully.
To make a bold turn, slip, fall down.
To go on the ice once more and run hard
Until the ice cracks and breaks up.
To hear the Sirocco [the north wind], Boreas [the south wind], and all
The winds at war leave their iron gates.
This is winter, but even so, what joy it brings!

Composing for Orphans

Known as the “Red Priest” because he was red-haired and ordained, Antonio Vivaldi served for many years as director of music at Venice’s Ospedale della Pietà (“Hospice of Compassion”), a large orphanage for girls. Being the music director of an orphanage might strike us today as a strange job for one of the most famous composers of his time, but judging from the music Vivaldi wrote for the young women at this particular institution, they must have been quite talented indeed. He actually wrote most of his concertos while in service to the orphanage.

Vivaldi was extremely prolific. He wrote almost 350 solo concertos (about two-thirds of which are for solo violin) and 45 double concertos (more than half of which are for two violins). His music was widely published and admired throughout Europe during his lifetime. J.S. Bach arranged several of Vivaldi’s concertos for the organ and in the process taught himself how to write concertos “in the Italian style.” Bach and Handel may have had greater facility at counterpoint, but Vivaldi was a master of melodic invention and formal novelty. Almost every one of Vivaldi’s concertos contains some unusual twist that makes it different from all the rest.

EXPAND YOUR PLAYLIST: VIVALDI

- **The Four Seasons:** “Spring.” The opening theme (Ritornello 1) is now a popular ringtone for cell phones.
- **The Four Seasons:** “Summer.” The finale depicts a violent thunderstorm.
- **The Four Seasons:** “Fall.” The finale depicts a hunting scene.
- **Concerto for Mandolin, RV 532.** More typically associated with bluegrass music, the mandolin was already a popular instrument in the Baroque.
- **Gloria, RV 589, for chorus and orchestra.** A thrilling setting of the Gloria portion of the Mass Ordinary.
- **Concerto for Flute, Strings, and Basso Continuo, op. 10, no. 1.** Nicknamed “The Tempest at Sea” because of its stormy sound.

Now listen to the movement, using the Listening Guide.
I can’t hear the difference in key areas between the sections. How can I learn to hear these changes?

With digital technology, it’s easy to make side-by-side comparisons. Using the Listening Guide, start the music at 0:37. The long note to which the solo violinist keeps returning is C, the tonic of C minor. Let the music run through 1:00. Vivaldi again and again emphasizes this new key area of C minor. Now go back to the beginning, which is in F minor. Hear the difference? The main note at the beginning is F, the root of the tonic key of F minor. Now let the music run through and listen for the change of key between the opening and 0:37. This may take some time at first, but once you start listening for changes of key, it gets easier to recognize them. And even if you don’t always hear the key changes consciously, you will appreciate that they affect the way the music sounds by providing both harmonic unity (the tonic) and variety (all other keys).
Program music—instrumental music explicitly connected in some way with a story, person, or idea outside the music itself—has long fired the imaginations of composers and listeners.

- **Johann Kuhnau, *Six Biblical Sonatas* (1700)**
  Each of these six sonatas for harpsichord depicts a famous story from the Bible. When David defeats Goliath, we “hear” the stone hurled toward the giant and the enormous thud when he falls to the ground.

- **Marin Marais, *An Image of Abdominal Surgery* (1725)**
  A lengthy work for solo viola da gamba, it depicts in great detail the removal of a gallstone. The score includes such comments as “The Incision,” “Blood Flows,” and “The Stone Is Removed.”

- **Ludwig van Beethoven, *Wellington’s Victory*, op. 91 (1813)**
  Depicts the victory of the English general over Napoleon’s forces at the Battle of Vittoria (Spain). The opening mimics the trumpet calls of the armies, and the percussion simulates the sounds of cannon and musket fire.

- **Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique* (1830)**
  See chapter 30.

  This work recreates, in sound, impressions of Paris, including honking horns of the traffic, French speech, and an American’s homesickness for his native country.

  The title suggests the acceleration and tremendous speed of this work for large orchestra. As the composer said, “You know how it is when someone asks you to ride in a terrific sports car, and then you wish you hadn’t?”

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**Word-Music Relationships (2): The Music**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repetitive figure in the strings suggests trembling.</th>
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<tr>
<td>The solo violin also “trembles” and moves from high to low, like the wind.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faster tempo (“running”); the music begins to “stamp” at 1:12.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The soloist bounces the bow very rapidly against the string, creating a “chattering” sound (2:35–3:03).</td>
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**What does the violin soloist do during the tutti sections?**

The soloist actually plays along with the first violin section of the orchestra. But because the sound of the solo instrument blends into the sound of the orchestra, the soloist cannot be heard as a separate, distinct voice in these sections.

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**Which is more important, the musical or the programmatic form?**

The two work in tandem and reinforce each other. We do not know if Vivaldi began with the poem and wrote a concerto around it, or if he began with a concerto and wrote a poem around it. It’s also possible that the two processes took shape simultaneously.
There are more violins in an orchestra than any other instrument. The violin is also the prototype for two larger versions: the mid-range viola and the low-range cello. The basic principles of the instrument are simple: a player draws a bow perpendicularly across the strings and sets them in motion, controlling the pitch by depressing the fingers onto the individual strings. The violinist controls the volume of the instrument by pressing the bow into the strings with greater or lesser pressure, and by moving the bow at a faster or slower speed. No two instruments are identical: the slightest variations in wood quality, the size and placement of the bridge, the exact shape of the f-holes, and even the nature of the varnish can affect the quality of an instrument’s sound.

The **horsehair**—from a horse’s tail—is the part of the bow that sets the violin’s strings in motion, creating sound.

The **tuning pegs** are turned clockwise or counterclockwise to increase or decrease tension on the strings, thereby raising or lowering the pitch of the strings as they are being tuned.

Four **strings** on the pitches G, D, A, and E. The lowest-sounding string, on the left, is the thickest; the highest string, on the right, is the thinnest.

The **fingertip**. The violinist presses the strings onto the fingerboard, thereby shortening the length of the vibrating portion of the string. The shorter the vibrating length, the higher the pitch.

The **bridge**, made of wood, elevates the strings and provides a fixed point at the opposite end from the top of the fingerboard. The bridge also transmits the vibration of the strings to the body of the instrument, and it is the vibration of the body’s wood that amplifies the sound naturally, without any electronics.

The **f-holes** (so called because they resemble the letter “F” in italics) direct some of the vibration of the body directly out into the air.

The **tailpiece** supports the strings. Optional small metal knobs allow for fine-tuning the strings.

The **body** of the instrument is made of specially treated and carefully carved wood covered with a varnish that both protects the wood and enhances the instrument’s sound. The interior of the instrument is hollow to allow the vibrating body to resonate more fully; a **sounding post**—a small dowel of wood inside this space and not visible here—helps transmit energy from the front (top) of the instrument to its back.