

THE FOUR SEASONS

Friday 5 February, 5.30pm and 8.30pm
Federation Concert Hall, Hobart

Emma McGrath director and violin

Sercan Danis violin

Jennifer Owen violin

Yue-Hong Cha violin

Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra

MOZART Serenade for Winds in E-flat, K 375 (25')

VIVALDI The Four Seasons (37')

The Serenade K 375 was written in 1781, a momentous year for Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791). This was the year the 25-year-old composer left home, left Salzburg (he settled in Vienna) and left guaranteed full-time employment, setting himself up as a freelance musician, something that was largely unheard of at the time and posed all sorts of risks. The Serenade was composed for the name-day of the sister-in-law of Viennese court painter, Joseph Hickel, and was first performed on 15 October 1781 (the feast of St Teresa of Avila). Mozart originally wrote the work for wind sextet but enlarged the instrumentation when he revised it the following year, giving us the combination of instruments we hear in this performance: two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons and two horns. The five-movement Serenade unfolds as follows: Allegro maestoso, Menuetto I, Adagio, Menuetto II, Allegro. Being a serenade, the music remains light and easy-going throughout.

Venice-born Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) wrote hundreds of concertos, many of them for the girls and young women at the Ospedale della Pietà (a church-run institution that was an orphanage, school, conservatory for girls and nunnery all rolled into one), where Vivaldi was music tutor. In addition to being a teacher, composer and violin virtuoso, Vivaldi was a priest. He had red hair, which gave rise to the nickname 'Il prete rosso' – the red priest. The Four Seasons, a collection of four three-movement violin concertos, was published in Amsterdam in 1725 and did much to consolidate Vivaldi's reputation as the leading Italian composer of his generation. Each concerto in The Four Seasons carries a title – Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter – and four sonnets (one for each season) published in the frontispiece of the score offer a running commentary on the soundscapes that Vivaldi seeks to evoke. Thus, Spring unfolds as follows:

Spring has come, and merrily the birds salute it with their happy song. And the streams, at the breath of little Zephyrs, run along murmuring sweetly.

Then, covering the air with a black cloak, come thunder and lightning, as if chosen to proclaim her; and when they have subsided, the little birds return once more to their melodious incantation.

The music, in turn, conjures up the sounds and sights spelt out in the poetry: birdsong, flowing streams, thunder and lightning. Other images that are evoked in the course of The Four Seasons include a cuckoo, gentle winds and a violent storm (Summer); a village fête, sleeping revellers and a hunt (Autumn); chattering teeth, biting rain and icy winds (Winter). Vivaldi brings a vast array of string effects into play and, remarkably, manages to synthesise the picturesque elements with the rigours of concerto form. Surprisingly, given the popularity of The Four Seasons today, Vivaldi's work fell into obscurity and was first revived in the modern period in a version for piano duet (!) in 1919. Vivaldi's popularity nowadays owes much to 20th-century recording technology as it was through long-playing records and radio that The Four Seasons found a new and appreciative audience.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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