

Program Notes

Spring Into Life

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George Walker	<i>Lyric for Strings</i>
Antonio Vivaldi	<i>The Seasons</i>
Igor Stravinsky	<i>Dumbarton Oaks</i>
Arvo Pärt	<i>Fratres</i>

In this remarkably varied performance, bringing together varied music of 18th-century Italy, 20th-century Estonia, and 20th-century North America, we affirm life and the power of music, as the GBS presents the largest array of performers assembled since the pandemic began. All of this music is striking for its impact on the listener, particularly given the short length of most of the pieces.



George Walker 1922-2018

Lyric for Strings

(1946)

The composer and pianist George Walker, a professor at Rutgers University from 1969-1992, was the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize for Music (1996). Walker's compositional output is notable for its eclecticism. Describing his generation of African-American composers, Walker wrote in 1991:

“Their common denominator is not a use of black idioms but a fascination with sound and color, with intensities and the fabric of construction. Pretentiousness and bombast are conspicuously absent.”

Walker adapted the second movement of his *String Quartet No. 1* to create the *Lyric for Strings* (1947, rev. 1990). The 24-year-old Walker titled this movement “Lament” and dedicated it to his grandmother, a former slave who had seen her husband sold, and she herself escape from slavery. This piece is notable for its impassioned lyricism, with rich harmonies juxtaposed with impassioned unison and two part lines. It is impossible to hear this piece and not be reminded of Samuel Barber's famed *Adagio for Strings* (1936); both men wrote these pieces when they were students at Philadelphia's famed Curtis Institute of Music, some eleven years apart.



Antonio Vivaldi 1678-1741

The Seasons

(c1716-17)

We then turn to one of the most familiar pieces in the Baroque repertory (since its 20th century revival), Antonio Vivaldi's (1678-1741) programmatic series of four violin concertos *The Seasons* (ca. 1716-7). Each piece illustrates a season of the year: spring, summer, autumn, and winter. Each concerto includes a 3-stanza sonnet. Such programmatic works were highly unusual in the Baroque era; the pieces include vivid musical depictions of sounds appropriate to rural life in that season. Though the incredibly prolific Vivaldi wrote some 500 concertos (in

addition to being a teacher, performer, and Catholic priest), his work is notable for its imagination, variety, and skill. Each concerto is a three-movement work with quick outer movements surrounding a slow inner movement. The poems are reprinted here, as the best possible listening enhancement:

Spring

Allegro

Springtime is upon us.
The birds celebrate her return with festive song,
and murmuring streams are
softly caressed by the breezes.
Thunderstorms, those heralds of Spring, roar,
casting their dark mantle over heaven,
Then they die away to silence,
and the birds take up their charming songs once more.

Largo

On the flower-strewn meadow, with leafy branches
rustling overhead, the goat-herd sleeps,
his faithful dog beside him.

Allegro

Led by the festive sound of rustic bagpipes,
nymphs and shepherds lightly dance
beneath the brilliant canopy of spring.

Summer

Allegro non molto

Under a hard Season, fired up by the Sun
Languishes man, languishes the flock and burns the pine
We hear the cuckoo's voice;
then sweet songs of the turtledove and finch are heard.
Soft breezes stir the air, but threatening
the North Wind sweeps them suddenly aside.
The shepherd trembles,
fearing violent storms and his fate.

Adagio e piano - Presto e forte

The fear of lightning and fierce thunder
Robs his tired limbs of rest
As gnats and flies buzz furiously around.

Presto

Alas, his fears were justified
The Heavens thunders and roar and with hail
Cuts the head off the wheat and damages the grain.

Autumn

Allegro

Celebrates the peasant, with songs and dances,
The pleasure of a bountiful harvest.
And fired up by Bacchus' liquor,
many end their revelry in sleep.

Adagio molto

Everyone is made to forget their cares and to sing and dance
By the air which is tempered with pleasure
And (by) the season that invites so many, many
Out of their sweetest slumber to fine enjoyment

Allegro

The hunters emerge at the new dawn,
And with horns and dogs and guns depart upon their hunting
The beast flees and they follow its trail;
Terrified and tired of the great noise
Of guns and dogs, the beast, wounded, threatens
Languidly to flee, but harried, dies.

Winter

Allegro non molto

To tremble from cold in the icy snow,
In the harsh breath of a horrid wind;
To run, stamping one's feet every moment,
Our teeth chattering in the extreme cold.

Largo

Before the fire to pass peaceful,
Contented days while the rain outside pours down.

We tread the icy path slowly and cautiously,
for fear of tripping and falling.
Then turn abruptly, slip, crash on the ground and,
rising, hasten on across the ice lest it cracks up.
We feel the chill north winds course through the home
despite the locked and bolted doors...
this is winter, which nonetheless
brings its own delights.



Igor Stravinsky 1892-1971

Concerto in E flat, “Dumbarton Oaks”

(1937-38)

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) found his way from Russia to living and working in France, and came on tour to the United States in 1935. He became a U.S. resident when World War II broke out, remaining here for the rest of his life. His 1937-8 Concerto in E-flat (almost always referred to as “Dumbarton Oaks”) was commissioned by Robert Woods Bliss and Mildred Barnes Bliss, whose Washington, DC estate bore that name. This estate later became a research institute of Harvard, and hosted the 1944 conference that led, ultimately, to the founding of the United Nations. The concerto is scored for chamber orchestra (flute, clarinet, bassoon, two horns, three violins, three violas, two cellos, and two basses), and is an example of Stravinsky’s neoclassical style—a conscious attempt to harken back to the order, balance, symmetry and elegance found in the works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and their contemporaries. The twelve-minute piece is composed in three movements, performed without interruption. It was the last piece Stravinsky composed in Europe. Nadia Boulanger, who had helped arrange the commission, conducted the premiere—a private event at Dumbarton Oaks. Each instrument functions as a soloist amid a largely polyphonic texture, and the opening theme and choice of strings used harken back to Bach’s Brandenburg Concerti. *Dumbarton Oaks* says a lot in a short time, using a relatively small number of performers.



Arvo Pärt b. 1935

Fratres for Strings and Percussion

(1977)

The Estonian minimalist composer Arvo Pärt (b. 1935) writes almost entirely using a technique he invented, called tintinnabuli (from the Latin word for bell), inspired by Gregorian chant and Renaissance polyphony. In tintinnabuli, one voice arpeggiates chords, and one voice moves in stepwise, or scalar motion. The harmonic vocabulary is simple and diatonic—drawn from the major or minor scale. *Fratres* (1977, rev. 1992), Latin for “brothers,” exists in many versions, all created by the composer. Here, we hear the version for violin soloist, strings, and percussion. This piece is typical of the majority of Pärt’s output, being variations on a six measure theme. The theme juxtaposes a sense of rushed busyness with a sense of quiet contemplation. *Fratres* is organized as nine sequences of chords, separated by a recurring motif in the percussion (the “refuge”). Much of the texture is three-part with drones (long, sustained, pitches repeated). The outer voices play only pitches from the D harmonic minor scale, while the middle voice plays only the pitches of an A minor chord. The clash of C# in the outer voices and C natural in the inner voices creates tension and ambiguity for the listener. While this may sound abstract and complex, *Fratres* affects the listener in a strong, visceral way, and has been used in the soundtrack of many films, including *There Will Be Blood* (2007).

Program notes by Frank Martignetti