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Notes on Vivaldi's "The Four Seasons": Words and Music

W. D. Snodgrass

The recent recording of Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* by Nikolaus Harnoncourt and the Concentus Musicus of Vienna (issued by *Das alte Werk*) is available in two formats. One contains only the four seasonal concerti, and the other also includes the eight other concerti of opus 8, the whole entitled *Il cimento dell' armonia e dell' inventione*. The boldness of Harnoncourt's interpretation extends even to the title, usually given as *The Conflict between Harmony and Invention*, but which Harnoncourt renders as "roughly: bold experiments with harmony and invention." The title aside, however, Harnoncourt's performances fully justify his description of the music as "experimental" and "avant-garde." I am scarcely the only listener who has heard this recording with the feeling that after twenty years of listening, I have just now heard this music for the first time!

The effect is quite as startling as when we found that the deep golden patina of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, so admired by generations of critics, disappeared with its layers of obscurant varnish; or when we came to Breughel's *Wedding Dance*, after its cleaning and restoration, to find that all the male dancers and the bagpiper were now sporting quite generous erections. There is no scarcity of interpreters ready to improve the work of art with a propriety and prettiness which smacks not of true invention but of its later glossy imitations.

Harnoncourt's notes amply demonstrate how *The Four Seasons* are directly based on, and closely illustrative of, the four Italian sonnets also perhaps composed by Vivaldi. In the printed score, each sonnet appears twice: first, separately at the beginning of the score; second, broken into lines and groups of lines

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and printed directly above that part of the music which embodies its contents. Further, even at the beginning of the score, where the sonnets are complete, letters are given in the margin to indicate the places in the music to which each poetry line or group of lines corresponds. Vivaldi provides occasional directions to inform the players what effects they are to imitate or suggest.

Thus, for instance, the very familiar slow movement of the “Spring” concerto illustrates these lines:

*Where the green meadow flowers all around,
Amidst soft whisperings of leaves and plants
The goatherd sleeps next to his faithful hound.*

In the score, the solo violin, whose serene melody represents the sleeping shepherd, has no dynamic marking so presumably plays at normal volume. The ensemble violins, representing the murmur of wind among the leaves, are marked *sempre pianissimo* (“always very softly”). The violas, however, representing the shepherd’s dog, are marked *sempre molto forte e strap-pado* (“always very loudly and abruptly”). As if taking no chances, Vivaldi also prints over this line *il cane chi grida* (“a barking dog”). By willfully ignoring these—Vivaldi’s specific directions—most performers have reduced this movement to sheer and, I think, cloying, prettiness, banishing that element of annoyance without which the scene cannot embody its right balance of opposed human qualities. Without irritants, there are only artificial pearls—and a good many artists, I fear, are only too ready to offer us wide-eyed natives just such phony jewelry in trade for the only world we have.

Harnoncourt points out numerous other such examples, but I shall leave the reader to consult his notes and hear his performance, preferably with score in hand.

In translating these sonnets I have tried not only to approximate the original’s meter and rhyme scheme but, far more important, its exact order of phrasing. Thus my lines, like their Italian counterparts, may be extracted and set at the proper places in the score. They might also be read aloud as part of the performance; I believe they should be. Most often, this would involve reading only during the pause preceding movements, just as we do for Couperin’s *Apotheosis of Corelli* (*Le Parnasse ou l’apothéose de Corelli*). During the first movements, however, I believe that the lines should be read at the point where they appear in the score, without any pause in the music, as we do for Marin Marais’s *The Gallbladder Operation* (*Le tableau de l’opération de la taille*). Frankly, we do not know what Vivaldi intended as the poems’ place in any performance—though if he, indeed, wrote these sonnets, then I for one have no doubts about whether he wanted them read aloud. But when he has presented us with such bold compositions—and Harnoncourt, moreover, has given us this daring new interpretation—I think the only adequate response on our part is to try a small *cimento* of our own, providing only that we do so *dell’ inventione e dell’ armonia*.