

THE FOUR SEASONS

Saturday, November 15, 2014 – 8pm at The VETS, Providence
Amica Rush Hour Concert – Friday, November 14, 6:30pm

Larry Rachleff, *conductor*

Jennifer Koh, *violin*

ROSSINI	<i>Semiramide: Overture</i>
VIVALDI	<i>The Four Seasons, op.8, Nos.1-4</i>
BEETHOVEN	<i>Symphony No.8, F major, op.93</i>

Overture to *Semiramide*

Gioacchino Rossini (1792-1868)

“Rossini continued to supply overtures, though many are derivative and only the overture to *Semiramide* is worthy of the composer,” asserts musicologist Philip Gossett in *The New Grove Dictionary*. Indeed, the *Semiramide* Overture is probably the epitome of all overtures by Rossini. Written in 1823 as a Voltaire-derived drama, the opera deals with Babylonian Queen Semiramis who plots with her lover to kill the king. She then falls in love with another young soldier, who is discovered to be her son. The tragic plot involves the death of both Semiramis and her original lover. Finally, the son takes his rightful place on the throne.

The overture forecasts and develops some interesting themes from the opera. The opening is an extended, two-part introduction beginning with a “steamroller” *crescendo* effect. The introduction concludes with extensive treatment of a theme, which, in the opera, is a hymn of loyalty to Semiramis. The main *Allegro* follows, based on two principal themes. Both come from the final tomb scene in which the high priests enter cautiously. In their day, the first was considered “shivery” and the second “gruesome,” though today they both probably sound cheerful. The literal recap brings back both themes, and the overture closes in the way that it opened — with an exciting *crescendo* leading to the brilliant full orchestra.

The Four Seasons

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741)

In 1725 Vivaldi published a collection of 12 concertos under the collective title, *Il Cimento dell' Armonia e dell' Inventione* (“The Contest between Harmony and Invention”). The first four of these were *Le Quattro Stagioni*, or *The Four Seasons*. Vivaldi, a priest, was also a famous violinist in his time and boasted the title *maestro di concerto* of the Pio Ospedale della Pietà, a distinguished school of music, and *maestro in Italia* of the Austrian Count von Morzin. *Il Cimento's* dedication to von Morzin implies that his orchestra had already performed *The Four Seasons*. Judging by a pirated French edition of *The Four Seasons* and early reports of French

performances, these concertos must have had the same immediate appeal for 18th-century listeners as they do today.

Music as literally programmatic as *The Four Seasons* was rare in the 18th century. These four violin concertos are based on a set of Italian sonnets, possibly written by Vivaldi himself. In the score, the composer indicates exactly which line or phrase of the poem is being illustrated. In general, the full orchestra reflects general text, while the solo violin illustrates pictorial detail. Here is a summary of *The Four Seasons*:

Spring.

- I. Birds sing and fountains flow, but there is also the sound of thunder and lightning.
- II. A goatherd sleeps, his faithful dog beside him.
- III. To the sound of rustic bagpipes, nymphs and shepherds dance.

Summer.

- I. The blazing sun sears the earth, but the songs of the cuckoo, dove and goldfinch can be heard. Thunderstorms threaten.
- II. The shepherd's sleep is disturbed by distant thunder and the buzz of insects.
- III. Lightning erupts, and hail stones pelt the ripened corn.

Autumn.

- I. Peasants celebrate the harvest with song, dance, and drink — and many revelers sink into sleep.
- II. Drunkards sleep amid gentle breezes.
- III. The hunt mingles the sounds of horns, guns, dogs, and shouting hunters. The prey flees but at last is caught.

Winter.

- I. We shiver and stamp our feet against the icy wind, but our teeth chatter nonetheless.
- II. We enjoy the comfort of an open fire while the rain patters outside.
- III. Walking on the ice is treacherous. Trying to maintain balance, one pitches and falls to the ground. The ice cracks, while all the winds engage in battle.

Symphony No.8 in F major, op.93
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Beethoven composed his Eighth Symphony during 1812, immediately upon completing the Seventh. At the time, he must have been re-evaluating his own aesthetic in relation to the High Classic music of Haydn and Mozart. For both symphonies, though progressive in many respects, owe much to the Classic ideal. Yet Beethoven could never regress completely back to an era that he had outgrown, which is exhibited in the proportions of the two symphonies: the Seventh was called “too long” and the Eighth “too short.”

The original manuscript title page to the Eighth Symphony reads, “Sinfonia Lintz in Monath October 1812.” Beethoven was in Linz throughout the previous summer, visiting his brother, Johann. There, he worked out his new symphony, mostly from sketches made during the writing

of the Seventh. Although parts for the Eighth were copied the following year, the symphony had to wait until February 1814 for its premiere.

The first movement has the compactness and good-natured qualities expected of a classical symphony. The true high point, however, is the second movement. As in the Seventh Symphony, this is not a slow movement at all. The Seventh's *Allegretto* is a study in tragedy, while the Eighth's *Allegretto scherzando* is its most comic aspect. The wit of this music is largely due to its constant, metronomic accompaniment, a conscious effect. Johann Mälzel, a good friend of Beethoven, by 1812 had invented a "musical chronometer," the forerunner to his metronome. Composers in Vienna had become fascinated with the novel invention, and the sound of the chronometer directly inspired — or at least influenced — Beethoven when he composed his *Allegretto*.

Considering the *scherzando* quality of the second movement, for Beethoven to make the third into a true scherzo would have been redundant and out of balance. As a result, he reverts to the moderate-tempo classical minuet. The trumpet calls toward the end of the main section evoke the coach's postillion signals of Beethoven's day, and he treats the motive comically with an overlapping echo in the woodwinds. The intent of this passage could be programmatic, since Beethoven was looking forward to going to Teplitz and Karlsbad (probably by post chaise) to take the baths after finishing his symphony.

The finale's rumbling mixture of rhythms and its panoply of themes show Beethoven's wit at its robust best. As Joseph Kerman and Alan Tyson in *The New Grove Dictionary* observe, "Beethoven could hardly have planned a more genial gesture of farewell for a time to the symphony and to the decade of work produced under its aegis."
