

EIGHT SEASONS – Violin Concerti by Vivaldi and Piazzolla

Heard a wonderful concert by the National Philharmonic at the Music Center at Strathmore (not the same as the National Symphony at Kennedy Center), led by maestro Piotr Gajewski with violin soloist Chee-Yun (Korean). The program consisted of Vivaldi's Four Seasons and The Four Seasons of Beunos Aires by Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992). So the violin soloist was onstage for the entire duration.

Vivaldi's work is so often played on classical radio that most of us consider it as background music to which we pay scant attention. It has been many years since I heard a live performance, and it was a voyage of rediscovery. Concentrating on its sounds without the distraction of a busy household brought out the structure of the work, four concertos each in three movements.

The Piazzolla work was a real revelation. Four single-movement works entitled with the Argentinian seasons. Originally composed for a jazz ensemble of violin, piano, electric guitar, double bass and bandoneon (a form of bellows concertina popular in Latin America), they were rearranged for solo violin and string orchestra, to echo the instrumentation of Vivaldi's work, by Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov on commission of violinist Gidon Kremer. The arranger inserted quotations from Vivaldi in the corresponding segments, recognizing the polar opposites of season in the Southern vs. Northern Hemispheres – thus Vivaldi's Spring is quoted in Piazzolla's Autumn, and so forth. Vivaldi's orchestration includes a harpsichord continuo, which was seldom heard in Piazzolla, except in the closing phrases of Piazzolla's Spring, where it quotes a well-known phrase from the Vivaldi work. The music is mostly melodic, with snatches of tango rhythms and moments of sharp atonality that add piquancy and spice. An unusual feature of one Piazzolla's pieces was two solo cadenzas – first by the lead cellist, punctuated here and there by plucking of double basses, and a second by the violin soloist.

Instead of playing each composition in turn, the program sequence intersperced the seasons from each composer. It made for a more varied presentation, as 12 successive movements of Baroque Vivaldi can be challenging to one's attention span.

The soloist was Chee-Yun, a young Korean violinist with dazzling technique. Dazzling technique is common in most current young virtuosos, but many of them lack the maturity to properly present not only the notes but the emotional depth of the composition. Not so here. She was fully emotionally involved in the music, expressed not only with spectacular performance, but with body language that showed she was fully enjoying the music, at times dancing to her own melodies. Playing to the crowd, yes, but making it all the more enjoyable.

A new experience for me: witnessing the snapping of a violin string during a performance. Legend has it that past virtuosos could continue by transposing the performance onto the remaining three strings, but she chose to go off-stage to restring. Since this happened early into the first movement of a Vivaldi, the performance resumed from the start of the piece.

After the performance, there was a presentation by the violinist and conductor Piotr Gajewski, with a Q/A session following. I asked if she faced challenges playing a Baroque violin (from the 1660's) in both Vivaldi's baroque music and in the modern idiom of Piazzoli. She answered that the now-standard steel strings make that difference less significant, compared to the gut strings of the Baroque era, which project poorly in the acoustics of today's concert halls. She mentioned when she heard a Baroque ensemble playing on gut strings, she thought her hearing was going bad from too many airline flights.

All in all, a most enjoyable afternoon.