

# TO EVERYTHING THERE IS A SEASON

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## TIMELINKS

1725

### VIVALDI

*Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons)*, op. 8, no. 1-4

Handel premieres two operas and composes a third in London

1870

### WAGNER

*Siegfried Idyll*

Wagner's *Die Walküre* premieres in Munich

1947

### BARBER

*Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, op. 24

Secretary of State George Marshall outlines "Marshall Plan" to relieve war-torn Europe

Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, which makes up the greater part of tonight's program, is one of the most popular classical music pieces extant. Even those who don't consider themselves classical music fans know it, thanks to its frequent use in movies, TV shows, commercials, wedding music, and cellphone ringtones. There have even been non-classical versions, in genres ranging from surf rock to heavy metal to jazz to electronica.

Vivaldi's Baroque masterpiece—or more properly, collection of masterpieces, being a quartet of violin concertos that are often performed together, but need not be—deserves its wild popularity, though perhaps not the ignominy of being used to sell garage doors, bathroom fixtures, and online bingo. And those are only recent instances.

*The Four Seasons'* continued popularity outside the classical world is due, first and foremost, to its evergreen freshness. Whenever you hear it, either intentionally or from an unbidden source, its opening notes are always a welcome sound.

Second, there is its tunefulness. Chances are you will leave the concert hall tonight humming a melody from one or another of Vivaldi's concertos.

Then, too, there is the rigid structure of each seasonal section, with three movements apiece and plenty of variety among them. In that sense, *The Four Seasons* possesses, dare we say it, an accessibility that approaches that of contemporary pop music.

Which is not to say it is not a serious piece.

*Le quattro stagioni* were published in 1725 as part of a series of 12 concertos titled *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione (The Contest Between Harmony and Invention)*. The actual time of its composition is lost, as few of Vivaldi's works are dated. *Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter* were each accompanied by a sonnet, possibly written by the composer himself, that point to specific images playing out in the music.

And while Vivaldi had specific scenes in mind, which we will discuss below, feel free to let your mind wander as the music plays and create your own version of each season's passing.

## ANTONIO VIVALDI

*Le quattro stagioni (The Four Seasons)* op. 8, no. 1-4  
*La primavera (Spring)*

Birds sing, soft breezes blow, and brooks murmur in the opening concerto of the quartet, offering opportunities for the narrative of the piece to play out in a dialogue between the soloist and ensemble. (Vivaldi was a virtuoso violinist himself, and in *The Four Seasons* he offers the soloist numerous opportunities to shine.) Sudden storms arise and the birds are silenced, only to reappear when calm returns. A goatherd and his dog sleep in the sun, while nymphs and shepherds dance to the sound of rustic bagpipes.

## SAMUEL BARBER

*Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, op. 24

**A CHILD'S FEELING** Samuel Barber took the text for his 1947 “lyric rhapsody,” *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*, from a short prose piece written by James Agee, who later used the work as the preamble to his Pulitzer Prize-winning autobiographical novel, *A Death in the Family*.

“It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking gently and talking gently and watching the street...” begins Barber’s adaptation, hewing closely to Agee’s richly descriptive, deeply nostalgic reverie of his growing up in the American South just after the turn of the 20th century.

Barber was drawn to Agee’s words, which struck a chord in him regarding his own childhood, which unfolded several states to the north, but not without significant similarities.

“I had always admired Mr. Agee’s writing, and this prose poem particularly struck me because the summer evening he describes in his native southern town reminded me so much of similar evenings when I was a child at home [in West Chester, Pennsylvania],” Barber told a CBS radio interviewer in 1949.

“I found out after setting this that Mr. Agee and I are the same age. And the year he described was 1915, when we were both five. You see, it expresses a child’s feeling of loneliness, wonder,



### **Born**

March 4, 1678, in Venice

### **Died**

July 27 or 28, 1741, in Vienna

### **First Performance**

Unknown

### **STL Symphony Premiere**

February 20, 1953, Harry Farbman was soloist with Vladimir Golschmann conducting

### **Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

December 4, 2011, Jennifer Koh was soloist, with Ward Stare conducting

### **Scoring**

solo violin  
continuo  
strings

### **Performance Time**

*La primavera (Spring)*  
approximately 11 minutes



On Wikimedia

**Born**

March 9, 1910, in West Chester, Pennsylvania

**Died**

January 23, 1981, in New York City

**First Performance**

April 9, 1948, Eleanor Steber, who commissioned the work, was soloist, with Serge Koussevitzky conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra

**STL Symphony Premiere**

October 28, 1950, Judith Doniger was soloist, with Vladimir Golschmann conducting

**Most Recent STL Symphony Performance**

December 31, 2009, Christine Brewer was soloist, with David Robertson conducting

**Scoring**

flute  
piccolo  
oboe  
English horn  
clarinet  
bassoon  
2 horns  
trumpet  
timpani  
triangle  
harp  
strings

**Performance Time**

approximately 16 minutes

and lack of identity in that marginal world between twilight and sleep.”

There were additional parallels. Agee’s father died in an automobile accident in 1916, making his reminiscence of his family’s idyllic life before that tragedy all the more powerful and poignant. Barber’s father was in failing health and died around the time *Knoxville* was composed. It was dedicated to his memory.

A final similarity is that both pieces were written in such powerful fits of nostalgia that they were completed quickly and without much revision, yet neither shows any negative effects of their rapid composition. Instead, both display a degree of technical mastery only occasionally visited upon works conceived and executed with such spontaneity.

**A LULLABY** Composed at the request of soprano Eleanor Steber, who sought a new work to perform with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, *Knoxville: Summer of 1915* begins with the gently rocking melody—as if it is almost a lullaby—accompanying lyrics describing the warm summer evening in vivid word paintings rich with alliteration. It is difficult to tell where the adult narrator and the boy from the text begin and end, increasing the piece’s dreamlike quality.

The middle section, with the brief, chaotic passage of a streetcar—“raising into iron moan, stopping, belling and starting, stentorous”—interrupts the reverie, but it, too, fades, melting into the coming night, described as “one blue dew.”

The narrator pictures himself and his family, lying on quilts over the “rough wet grass” and quietly talking of “nothing in particular or nothing at all.” He recounts his family members, one by one, and stares up at the vastness of space. Here the soprano voice takes flight, hitting some of the highest notes of the piece, still tethered, though, to the calm support of the orchestra.

As the piece draws to a close, the narrator turns serious, asking God to bless his people and “remember them in their time of trouble; and in the hour of their taking away”—hinting here of not only the personal travails of any normal family, but of the hard challenges of the years to come that would be faced by all Americans.

But such dreadful contemplations, too, eventually cease, and the narrator is carried to bed, and Barber, with a repetition of the opening theme and then notes rising to the heavens above, brings the piece to an appropriately dreamlike end.

## VIVALDI

*L'estate (Summer)*

### Performance Time

approximately 10 minutes

As we rejoin Vivaldi's narrative, the oppressive sun beats down, and while a few birds sing, the prevailing mood is one of dread, due to an oncoming storm. The shepherd weeps for fear and lack of rest as he is attacked by a swarm of flying insects. At last, the storm strikes, with lightning and hail that destroys the crop in the field.

## VIVALDI

*L'autunno (Autumn)*

### Performance Time

approximately 9 minutes

Apparently, all was not lost in the tempest of *Summer*, because *Autumn* depicts a joyous celebration of a rich harvest, with drinking, dancing, and singing among the peasants. The celebration gives way to sleep just as the warmth of summer slips away into the cool of the autumn. A hunt ensues, ending with the killing of an animal.

## RICHARD WAGNER

*Siegfried Idyll*

**A CHRISTMAS STORY** On Christmas morning, 1870, Richard Wagner's wife Cosima was awakened by the sound of a 15-piece orchestra performing on the stairs of the family's home—Tribtschen, on Lake Lucerne, Switzerland—under the baton of Wagner himself. It was the day after Cosima's 33rd birthday, which she chose to celebrate on Christmas, and the piece she heard was a present from her husband.

"When I woke up, I heard a sound," Cosima wrote in her diary that day. "It grew even louder.



### Born

May 22, 1813, in Leipzig

### Died

February 13, 1883, in Venice

### First Performance

Christmas Day, 1870, at the composer's villa near Lucerne, Switzerland; Wagner conducted a small orchestra assembled for the occasion

### STL Symphony Premiere

October 5, 1894, conductor unknown

### Most Recent STL Symphony Performance

February 24, 2008, Mark Elder conducting

### Scoring

flute  
oboe  
2 clarinets  
bassoon  
2 horns  
trumpet  
strings

### Performance Time

approximately 18 minutes

I could no longer imagine myself in a dream. Music was sounding, and what music! After it had died away, R. came in to me with the five children and put into my hands the score of his ‘Symphonic Birthday Greeting.’ I was in tears, but so, too, was the whole household. R. had set up his orchestra on the stairs and thus consecrated our Tribschen forever! The *Tribschen Idyll*—thus the work is called.”

In fact, the piece’s title is much more long-winded. But this is Wagner, after all. It was called *Tribschen Idyll with Fidi’s Birdsong and the Orange Sunrise, a Symphonic Birthday Greeting. Presented to His Cosima by Her Richard, 1870.*

Being a gift, it was never intended for public performance, and there was obviously no need to footnote the title for his wife. But for our purposes, it should be understood that “Fidi” was the Wagners’s nickname for their son Siegfried, born in June 1869. The birdsong was inspired by a bird that sang outside their home just prior to Siegfried’s birth, while the orange sunrise refers to the magical play of light off the bedroom wall that morning, which brought the composer to tears.

While we’re at it, the “five children” from Cosima’s diary entry above, were the two she’d had with her previous husband—pianist, conductor, and composer Hans von Bülow—and the three she’d had with Wagner—Isolde, Eva, and the newborn Siegfried.

The *Idyll*—which was accompanied by a love poem in which Wagner described the couple’s bliss after several years of turmoil and scandal—is strikingly tender and intimate, especially for Wagner, who is known for his bluster and excess. Several of the themes heard in the piece later found their way into his opera *Siegfried*.

But the piece did not become known as *Siegfried Idyll* until later. Wagner expanded the orchestration to make it more salable, and the score was sold in 1878 to help satisfy his ever-present debts.

For her part, Cosima was inconsolable over the loss. She wrote in her diary, “The *Idyll* is sent off today; the secret treasure is to become public property—may the pleasure others take in it match the sacrifice I am making!”

That is a wish that appears to have come true. The *Siegfried Idyll* remains the most oft-played of Wagner’s purely instrumental works and is beloved for its beauty, emotion, and—again, this is Wagner we’re talking about—relative brevity.

## VIVALDI

*L’inverno (Winter)*

### Performance Time

approximately 7 minutes

Vivaldi’s depiction of the seasons ends with the chill of winter setting in, the wind blowing mercilessly, causing teeth to chatter and feet to stamp in an effort to keep warm. A sharp contrast is drawn with the pleasure of sitting by a warm fire while outside there is the peril of slipping and falling down, or worse, break through the ice on a frozen lake. “This is winter,” Vivaldi says in his accompanying poem, “but it brings joy.”