



The Audacity of Max Richter

By Brian Lauritzen

On the list of things you “don’t mess with,” it’s right up there with Texas and the Zohan. You just don’t mess with a classic. Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* is certainly a classic. It deserves all the love it’s gotten over the years and its status as an iconic work of classical music is unquestionably secure.

But, damn the torpedoes: composer Max Richter has messed with *The Four Seasons*. He takes his “recomposition” full speed ahead into waters fraught with classical music purists and those who would protect and defend tradition over innovation.

“My piece doesn’t erase the Vivaldi original,” Richter told *NPR* when violinist Daniel Hope’s original recording of the recomposition was released six years ago. “It’s a conversation from a viewpoint. I think this is just one way to engage with it.”

In fact, Richter says he grew up listening to Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons*.

“As a child, I fell in love with it,” he told *NPR*. “It’s beautiful, charming music with a great melody and wonderful colors. Then, later on, as I became more musically aware — literate, studied music and listened to a lot of music — I found it more difficult to love it. We hear it everywhere — when you’re on hold, you hear it in the shopping center, in advertising; it’s everywhere. For me, the record and the project are trying to reclaim the piece, to fall in love with it again.”

If you’ve watched the Netflix hit *Chef’s Table*, you’ve heard part of Max Richter’s Vivaldi recomposition already. The section “Winter 1” is the theme music for that show. The music is very nearly Vivaldi’s from the first movement of the *Winter* concerto, but with a beat missing here and there. It’s simultaneously disorienting, fascinating, infuriating, and exhilarating. Some of the sections remain more faithful to Vivaldi’s original; some are more of a departure. The end result is music that is a dream where a sort-of modern-day Vivaldi is one of the characters.

Vivaldi’s original four violin concerti that make up *The Four Seasons* are not just special, they are revolutionary. In addition to being utterly original virtuosic vehicles for the violin, they are a fusion of music and poetry that is unlike just about anything that came before them. Each of the seasons is based on a sonnet. Authorship remains unclear, but it’s possible, even probable, that Vivaldi himself wrote each sonnet.

When the text speaks of chirping of birds celebrating the return of *Spring* “with festive song,” we hear that with a trio of violins.

In *Summer*, you can hear the buzzing of insects (specifically gnats and flies) in the second movement, followed by a torrential afternoon thunderstorm.

Autumn is a big harvest party, in which the violin soloist gets to play the town drunk in the first movement, then after everyone sleeps off their ale in the second movement, they all head out hunting in the finale.

Winter is icy and the music depicts the uncertainty of footsteps on a slippery walkway. The famous middle movement (aren’t they all famous?) depicts the warmth of a crackling fireplace while cold rain falls outside.

We don’t need a recomposition of *The Four Seasons* to love them. However, with Max Richter’s creation presented side-by-side with Vivaldi’s original, it allows us to hear that old iconic work in a new and, hopefully, exciting way.

One final thought on Vivaldi: he was an extremely prolific composer who wrote more than 500 concerti, nearly 50 operas, close to 100 sonatas and other pieces of chamber music. When he was 25 years old, he started working at the Ospedale della Pietà, an orphanage in Venice. Well, I say orphanage. That’s actually a euphemism. There were Ospedales all over the place, homes for the children of noblemen and

their various mistresses. I say mistresses. That implies there was a relationship between nobleman and woman. In fact, oftentimes there was not, and even if there was, it wasn’t necessarily a consensual relationship.

Each of these orphanages had a tiny window called a scaffetta, where mothers could leave the children that they were unable to care for. No questions asked. When they were old enough, these orphans were handed an instrument and taught to play by Maestro Vivaldi. At age 15, the boys had to leave to learn a trade, but the girls stayed.

So, Vivaldi’s orchestra — the group that premiered pieces like *The Four Seasons* — was made up of mostly orphaned, abandoned teenage girls. These young women became some of the most celebrated musicians of their time.

Vivaldi was associated with the Ospedale for most of the rest of his career. He was the Master of Music there and worked on the premises from 1703 to 1715 and later would write concertos for the Ospedale wherever he was at the time and mail them back to Venice. (Two concerti per month.)

Considering his employment history — a life dedicated to service of some of the most marginalized members of society — it’s not difficult to imagine that if Vivaldi were alive today, he’d likely pass up gigs in glittering concert halls and instead organize a concert series in a refugee camp, or an addiction detox center, or Skid Row. No, he wasn’t perfect and no, his music doesn’t automatically make us better people. But this part of his story can serve as an inspiration and invitation to us to also serve others.

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