

Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Reena Esmail: *RE/Member*

Los Angeles-based Reena Esmail navigates between the worlds of Indian and Western musical traditions. Her formal education reflects both; she holds degrees from Juilliard and the Yale School of Music, and also studied Hindustani music in India on a Fulbright-Nehru grant. *RE/Member* began as a season inaugural piece during the first year of the pandemic. By the time of its premiere, the significance of returning to live performance had taken on new layers of meaning: “The sense that something is being brought back together,” Esmail has written, and “that we don’t want to forget the perspectives [we have] gained during this time.” The piece opens and closes with solo oboe, framing the work. Esmail’s sparkling central Allegro is modeled on the overtures to Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* and Bernstein’s *Candide*.

Richard Strauss: Concerto in D Major for Oboe and Small Orchestra

Late in his career, during and after World War II, Richard Strauss rekindled his early interest in the orchestra. This period of orchestral compositions included an Oboe Concerto, which he wrote at the suggestion of an American serviceman stationed in Strauss’s village after the Allies defeated the Nazis. The concerto is a gentle and wry work, a loving farewell to the 19th century. New Jersey Symphony Principal Oboe Robert Ingliss thinks of it as “a bucolic and light-filled compositional tour de force.” In addition to its demanding solo role, the concerto contains rich writing for the entire woodwind section.

Antonio Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons*

Antonio Vivaldi was ordained as a priest, but spent most of his life as a professional musician working at a Venetian orphanage for girls that was also a music school. While his music was known throughout Europe, his best-known piece, *The Four Seasons*, is part of a larger set of twelve concerti, issued first in 1725 as Vivaldi’s Opus 8. A sonnet at the head of each “season” explained its program, and excerpts from the poems also appeared in the printed music, pinpointing places where a specific event was being illustrated. Each concerto

has abundant references to the sounds of nature and the outdoors, emulating breezes and gusty winds, bird calls, rain and thunderstorms, all framed with rustic songs and dances. Listen for strong dynamic contrasts, as well as dazzling writing for the soloist. Three centuries after it was written, *The Four Seasons* still sounds fresh.

Reena Esmail: *RE/Member*

Reena Esmail

Born: February 11, 1983, in Chicago, Illinois

Composed: 2022

World Premiere: September 2022, in Seattle's Benaroya Hall with oboist Mary Lynch VanderKolk

Duration: 5 minutes

Instrumentation: three flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), three oboes, three clarinets, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, snare drum, cymbals, triangle, temple blocks, marimba, chimes, glockenspiel), solo oboe, and strings

Los Angeles-based Reena Esmail navigates between the worlds of Indian and Western musical traditions, and her formal education reflects both. She was awarded a Fulbright-Nehru grant to study Hindustani music in India, working there with Srimati Lakshmi Shankar and Gaurav Mazundar.

In the West, Esmail holds degrees from the Juilliard School and the Yale School of Music, where she completed a Doctor of Musical Arts in 2018. Her principal teachers read like a who's who of new music in the USA: Susan Botti, Aaron Jay Kernis, Christopher Theofanidis, Martin Bresnick, Christopher Rouse and Samuel Adler. The title of Esmail's dissertation at Yale summarizes her interests and compositional goals: *Finding Common Ground: Uniting Practices in Hindustani and Western Art Musicians*.

RE/Member began as a new season inaugural piece for the Seattle Symphony during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its premiere was delayed because of pandemic protocols mandating no wind or brass instruments. By the time it was premiered, the significance of returning to live performance had taken on layers and meaning individual to every musician, every audience member, as Esmail's composer's note explains:

I wanted this piece to feel like an overture, and my guides were two favorites: Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and Bernstein's *Candide*. Each is breathless and energetic, with pockets of intimacy and tenderness. Each contains many parallel universes that unfold quickly. Each has beautiful, memorable melodies that speak and beckon to one another. I strove for all of this in *RE|Member*.

This piece connects two meanings of the word 'remember.' Firstly, the sense that something is being brought back together. The orchestra is 're-membering,' coalescing again after being apart. The pandemic will have been transformative: the orchestra is made up of individuals who had a wide variety of experiences in this time. And they are bringing those individual experiences back into the

collective group. There might be people who committed more deeply to their musical practice, people who were drawn into new artistic facets, people who had to leave their creative practice entirely, people who came to new realizations about their art, career, life. All these new perspectives, all these strands of thought and exploration are being brought back together.

And the second meaning of the word: that we don't want to forget the perspectives which each of these individuals gained during this time, simply because we are back in a familiar situation. I wanted this piece to honor the experience of coming back together, infused with the wisdom of the time apart.

The oboe soloist has a unique role, framing the work with an introspective, questioning introduction, echoes of which recur at *RE/Member's* conclusion. Enclosed within is a dizzying cascade of activity. Esmail's use of Middle Eastern and Asian-inflected scales gives the music a foreign quality; so too does her frequent use of sliding pitches, reminiscent of the Indian sitar. She includes several cameo solos for other members of the orchestra, including concertmaster, principal cello and marimba. The woodwind writing is virtuosic: fluid, precise and engaging. *RE/Member* makes a personal statement that has relevance to us all, for we each had our own unique experience during the pandemic and in its aftermath. Esmail's piece makes for thought-provoking listening.

Soloist Robert Ingliss adds, "My colleagues often make jest of my 'noodling' warmup. It's nice to see something like that written down [in Esmail's solo oboe writing]! All that virtuosic passage work for the woodwinds makes me think that Reena Esmail knew we were all woodshedding – some of us literally! – and she was offering us an outlet once we were back in the world of live concerts. I love the unison strings. Many of us first encountered that sound listening to the great Beatles tune 'Within You Without You.'"

Esmail is currently the Swan Family Artist-in-Residence of the Los Angeles Master Chorale. She served as composer-in-residence to the Seattle Symphony during the 2020-21 season. She is also an Artistic Director of Shastra, an organization that, according to Esmail's website, "promotes cross-cultural music connecting music traditions of India and the West."

Richard Strauss: Concerto for Oboe and Orchestra

Richard Strauss

Born: June 11, 1864, in Munich, Germany

Died: September 8, 1949, in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

Composed: 1945

World Premiere: February 26, 1946 in Zurich; the soloist was Marcel Sallet; Dr. Volkmar Andreae conducted the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra.

Duration: 28 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, solo oboe and strings

In his 85 years, Richard Strauss saw more of the world, and more changes in the world, than most people would in two lifetimes. He grew up in the heyday of the Habsburg empire, whose spirit was captured by the Waltz King Johann Strauss Jr.; he lived to see the rise and fall of the Third Reich and the attendant horrors of a global war. Strauss's musical language during this lengthy and tumultuous career changed surprisingly little, and it evolved more than it altered. Even in the then-radical early operas *Salome* (1905) and *Elektra* (1909), Strauss's style was readily identifiable. What changed more was the direction his talent took. In the 1880s and 1890s, he established and developed his reputation on the basis of his orchestral tone poems, including *Don Juan* (1888-89), *Death and Transfiguration* (1888-89), *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* (1894-95), *Don Quixote* (1896-97) and *Ein Heldenleben* (1897-98). These remain his best known and most popular compositions. After 1900, however, Strauss focused to a far greater extent on the stage. *Salome* and *Elektra* were followed by 11 more operas between 1911 and 1942, plus three ballet scores and the incidental music to two plays.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, however, Strauss rekindled his early interest in the orchestra and in non-operatic vocal music. His late works -- roughly those composed after 1940 -- are collectively referred to as his "Indian Summer." While they are uneven in quality, there are some excellent pieces among this harvest. The Oboe Concerto is one of them. It was written in 1945 at the suggestion of John de Lancie, an American serviceman who entered Garmisch, the village where Strauss was living, when the Nazis capitulated to the Allies. De Lancie was a peacetime member of the Pittsburgh Symphony who later became Principal Oboe of the Philadelphia Orchestra.

During conversations conducted in French with the aging composer, de Lancie asked why Strauss had written no oboe concerto when so many superb oboe solos existed in his orchestral music. Although Strauss is said to have expressed no interest in such a work, de Lancie's prompting evidently took root. The short score to the concerto took shape in late summer 1945. Strauss orchestrated the piece some six weeks later, eschewing the large orchestras of his tone poems in favor of a chamber ensemble consisting of woodwinds in pairs, with an English horn substituting for oboes, and strings. Marcel Saillet played the premiere with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra in February 1946.

The speed with which Strauss embraced the new idea confirm that his imagination was still fertile. He had only composed two concerti as a young man: the First Horn Concerto (written for his father, who was principal horn of the Munich opera orchestra), and an early violin concerto. Both date from the early 1880s. Sixty years later, he wrote his Second Horn Concerto in 1942. This oboe concerto was his swan song in the concerto genre. It is a gentle and wry work, which sounds as much like a loving farewell to the 19th century as *Rosenkavalier* seemed a salute to the 18th. Decades past any need to assert his presence on the cutting edge of musical style, Strauss revels in what he does best. The Oboe Concerto is polished and persuasive, celebrating a world gone by without a whisper of apology. Its avoidance of any referral to the turmoil of the war is striking. Perhaps this is music best heard out of its historical context, on strictly absolute terms.

IN THE SOLOIST'S WORDS

The Oboe Concerto by Richard Strauss is arguably the most important 20th-century work for the instrument, yet it is rarely performed. New Jersey Symphony Principal Oboe Robert Ingliss says that, apart from his own performances, he has never heard the work live except in a rehearsal. He explains the apparent contradiction of infrequent performances. “The concerto has inherent difficulties involved with stamina. The opening, for example, is one long arc 55 measures long, almost without a break! There are natural places to phrase and take a breath, but it all has to be carefully planned out for us oboists. Because the opening of the reed is so tiny, we often have a surplus of air that needs to be expelled before taking a breath. There are a couple of spots where it is useful to use ‘circular breathing,’ a technique whereby one momentarily forces air out with the cheeks while taking fresh air into the lungs through the nose.”

Ingliss’s acquaintance with the work goes back decades, to his student years. “When the Heinz Holliger LP with Edo de Waart conducting the Philharmonia Orchestra [was released], I was not familiar with the piece, but immediately fell in love with it, and purchased the music right away.” His perspective on the concerto has evolved over the years. “Originally, I viewed the Strauss as a heroic feat for the oboist. Now, I think of it more as a bucolic and light-filled compositional *tour de force*.”

It still presents formidable challenges. In addition to the stamina issue, Ingliss cites technical issues in the Strauss. “He definitely wrote some finger twisters! But these aren’t just scales and arpeggios; they are beautifully crafted embellishments that always appear in new guises.”

Ingliss finds a parallel between Strauss’s Concerto, written at the tail end of World War II, and Ravel’s *Le Tombeau de Couperin*, written after his return from the First War. “Ravel dedicated each movement to a friend who died in that conflict, yet the entire atmosphere of the work belies the events that engendered it,” he says. “Strauss professed to be apolitical, but we know what he really thought of the Nazis. His *Metamorphosen* is quite dark, with quotations from the funeral march of Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony, as well as the famous ‘fate’ motive in the Fifth Symphony. Beethoven often followed works of such intensity with something less emotionally draining. Strauss may have felt a similar need writing the Oboe Concerto, which immediately followed *Metamorphosen*.”

He notes a clear connection to Strauss’s earlier works. “There is great oboe writing in all the tone poems, but I am especially partial to the extended and demanding solos in his operas,” he specifies. “I’ve had the great fortune to be able to play many of these: *Salome*, *Elektra*, *Der Rosenkavalier* [and several of his other operas]; all have long solos that are wide-ranging in terms of tessitura, technique, and expression. And yet in mood [the concerto] also harks back to his early wind works, such as the Serenade [Op. 7], which we played in New Jersey with Xian conducting, and the Suite [for winds, Op. 4].”

Ingliss also appreciates Strauss’s rich writing for the rest of the New Jersey Symphony woodwinds. “I look forward to that contrapuntal interplay with the clarinet, especially, in the first movement, and to all the woodwinds – flute, English horn, clarinet, and bassoon – in the *Till Eulenspiegel*-like third movement.”

Another unusual feature of the concerto is Strauss's cadenzas. Ingliss explains: "The first cadenza, linking the second and third movements, is preceded by an orchestral *tutti* that ends with a questioning *appoggiatura* in the winds; it's quite dramatic. It's written as a *secco* recitative with pizzicato strings, and takes us from the key of B-flat of the slow movement back to the main tonality of the piece, D major. The second cadenza, while never leaving D major, is still transitional as well, and introduces the final metamorphosis of the thematic material, a lovely kind of waltz music reminiscent of *Der Rosenkavalier*.

"I love that last section," he continues. "It's so uplifting and life-affirming. What a beautiful ending to a beautiful concerto. One might beg to differ when Strauss referred to himself as a first-rate second-rate composer!"

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Antonio Vivaldi: *The Four Seasons [Le quattro stagioni]*, Op. 8, Nos. 1-4

Antonio Vivaldi

Born: March 4, 1678, in Venice, Italy

Died: July 28, 1741, in Vienna, Austria

Composed: 1718–1720; published in 1725

World Premiere: undocumented; probably in Venice, early 1720s

Duration: 37 minutes

Instrumentation: solo violin, strings and continuo

Vivaldi spent most of his career in the capacity of musical director and violin teacher at a Venetian conservatory and orphanage for girls, the Seminario Musicale dell'Ospedale della piet . During his lifetime, he achieved greater renown as a violinist than as a composer. His propensity for the instrument is evidenced by the astonishing number of concerti he wrote for it: more than 230 of his 500-odd surviving concerti are for solo violin and strings.

The Four Seasons consists of the first four of a cycle of twelve concerti published with the fanciful title *Il Cimento dell'Armonia e dell'Invenzione* ("The Contest Between Harmony and Invention"). The idea was the contrast of rational technique (harmony and the theory of composition) to free imagination (invention). *Il Cimento* was published in 1725 as Vivaldi's Opus 8. The Amsterdam publisher Le C ne issued the concerti with a sonnet at the head of each 'season,' explaining its program. Excerpts from the poems also appeared in the printed music, pinpointing places where a specific event was being illustrated. Such illustrative text-painting was particularly popular in France. These concertos were performed regularly at Paris' Concert Spirituel, one of Europe's first public concert series, founded in 1726. It is a measure of Vivaldi's fame that he was published in the faraway Netherlands and performed throughout Europe.

The Four Seasons remains Vivaldi's best loved composition. The four Italian sonnets, possibly written by Vivaldi himself, provide a vivid narrative for the music, with recurring images of breezes and gusty winds, bird calls,

rain and thunderstorms, and rustic songs and dances. All are illustrated in the music. The finale to the 'Autumn' concerto is distinguished by a hunt (*caccia*).

Each concerto is in the three movement, fast-slow-fast sequence that Vivaldi standardized as concerto form. The orchestral sections are almost exclusively *ritornelli* [a recurring musical idea for the full ensemble, restated in various keys]. Vivaldi takes his virtuosic flights in the solo passages, evoking the seasonal images of each poem. His imaginative writing features strong rhythmic vitality and highly idiomatic passage work. Nearly three centuries after it was composed, *The Four Seasons* still presents a formidable challenge to the virtuoso violinist.

Translations of the four sonnets follow:

SPRING

Spring has come and with it gaiety
The birds salute it with joyous song.
And the brooks, caressed by Zephyr's breath,
Flow meanwhile with sweet murmurings.

The sky is covered with dark clouds,
Announced by lightning and thunder.
But when they are silenced, the little birds
Return to fill the air with their song.

Then does the meadow, in full flower,
Ripple with its leafy plants.
The goat-herd dozes, guarded by his faithful dog.

Rejoicing in the pastoral bagpipes,
Nymphs and Shepherds dance, in love,
Their faces glowing with Springtime's brilliance.

SUMMER

Under the heavy season of a burning sun,
Man languishes, her herd wilts, the pine is parched
The cuckoo finds its voice, and chiming in with it
The turtle-dove, the goldfinch.

Zephyr breathes gently but, contested,
The North-wind appears nearby and suddenly:

The shepherd sobs because, uncertain,
He fears the wild squall and its effects:

His weary limbs have no repose, goaded by
His fear of lightning and wild thunder;
While gnats and flies in furious swarms surround him.
Alas, his fears prove all too grounded,
Thunder and lightning split the Heavens, and hail-stones
Slice the top of the corn and other grain.

AUTUMN

The country-folk celebrate, with dance and song,
The joy of gathering a bountiful harvest.
With Bacchus's liquor, quaffed liberally,
Their joy finishes in slumber.

Each one renounces dance and song
The mild air is pleasant
And the season invites every increasingly
To savor a sweet slumber.

The hunters at dawn go to the hunt,
With horns and guns and dogs they sally forth,
The beasts flee, their trail is followed.

Already dismayed and exhausted, from the great noise
Of guns and dogs, threatened with wounds,
They flee, languishing, and die, cowering.

WINTER

Frozen and trembling amid the chilly snow
Our breathing hampered by horrid winds
As we run, we stamp our feet continuously,
Our teeth chatter with the frightful cold.

We move to the fire and contented peace
While the rain outside pours in sheets.
Now we walk on the ice, with slow steps
Attentive how we walk, for fear of falling.

If we move quickly, we slip and fall to earth,
 Again walking heavily on the ice,
 Until the ice breaks and dissolves;

We hear from the closed doors
 Boreas and all the winds at war,
 This is winter, but such as brings joy.

– Translated from Italian sonnets attributed to Antonio Vivaldi

IN THE SOLOIST’S WORDS

Concertmaster Eric Wyrick has lived with Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* for a very long time. “I first played the complete *Seasons* 35 years ago!” he recalls. Over the years, he has altered his approach to this beloved work, as he explains.

“I was very ambitious with ornamentation at that time, and it was quite fashionable to add much flowery filler, especially in the slow movements. Later in my experience with the concerto, there came a point when I adopted a Baroque style that had become fashionable as well. Now I play a hybrid Baroque style that incorporates my personal expression. My tastes have evolved over the years and I am more confident with respect to how I want it to be played, rather than what is or isn’t in vogue. In this way, I keep my interests and interpretation fresh!”

He thinks that the poems attributed to Vivaldi are central to understanding and interpreting the concerti. “Vivaldi’s text descriptions are so important in playing these works,” he asserts. “I prefer to be clear about the characters described by Vivaldi but not to over-act.” He takes his cue from the music, noting that Vivaldi is remarkably clear in how he depicts certain effects. “He is so clever and innovative that some of the techniques can be lifted (I have done this) and incorporated or improvised into other pieces – when appropriate! Even in modern contemporary scenarios, his techniques still apply.”

What he loves best about *The Four Seasons* is its eternal spontaneity. “They make the performance sound as if we are making it up as we go. Even though we have played it and heard it so many times it seems totally improvised! Fantastic writing!”

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