

Avison

ENSEMBLE

reviews

ANTONIO VIVALDI CONCERTI OPUS 8



THE AVISON ENSEMBLE

PAVLO BEZNOSIUK, DIRECTOR & VIOLIN

2 CDs on Linn Records, CKD 365

- **BBC Radio 3 CD Review Disc of the Week, 19 November 2011**

... lovely, warm colourful playing
... one of the finest period-instrument bands
... vibrant, authentic and involving

CLASSIC FM MAGAZINE

Jane Jones

13 February 2012



Although Vivaldi's vast output spent centuries collecting dust before it was rediscovered, we know The Four Seasons was a European hit in his lifetime, and along with other eight violin concertos in this set, it reveals the composer's exceptional skill, writing with both dazzling virtuosity and an appealing humanity.

You can choose how you like your Vivaldi these days – tough and punchy or meticulous, even academic! The Avison Ensemble presents Vivaldi's music with none of the affectation of some superstar performances in this thoughtful yet intensely musical reading of a work which suffers from its own success! Vivaldi is so clever at revealing the human condition through his music, and the flowing, organic playing of the ensemble with all the right attention to detail highlights the composer's intentions to explore our emotional reaction to – of all things – the weather!

This has to be one of the most vibrant, authentic and involving recordings of Vivaldi's violin concertos I've heard. This two-CD set is great value.

THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

Anna Picard

06 November 2011

Though based in the North -East, the Avison's double-disc of Vivaldi's Opus 8 Violin Concertos rivals the sun-kissed performances of Europa Galante and Concerto Italiano. Pavlo Beznosiuk is soloist-director, all flinty trills and silky legato in The Four Seasons and pithy grace in the D and G minor Concertos. Alternating archlute and guitar and harpsichord and organ respectively, Paula Chateauneuf and Roger Hamilton pinpoint the constant play of light central to Vivaldi's music. Delicious.

INTERNATIONAL RECORD REVIEW

Marc Rochester

01 January 2012

If Pavlo Beznosiuk and his Avison Ensemble are to make any impact at all in the saturated market of period-performance Seasons, there will need to be something very distinctive or special about this set. True, they make for unusually dramatic lightning bolts and a particularly noisily snoring goatherd in 'Spring', the heat is particularly withering in 'Summer', the peasants dance with an almost aromatic rusticity in 'Autumn' – helped by the reduction of the continuo to a single double bass to add a faintly comical air to the first movement violin solos – and the icicles have a tantalizingly brittle quality while Beznosiuk himself shivers with remarkable energy in 'Winter'. Taken overall, this is a Seasons which mostly keeps dramatic overstatement in check while maintaining a sense of decorum, and is distinguished only by the quality of the playing rather than by any insightful interpretative originality.

However, this is, of course, far more than just another recording of The Four Seasons. It is a recording of the complete Op. 8 Concertos – 'The Contest Between Harmony and Invention', as most of us translate the title (although in his supplementary booklet note, Beznosiuk gets himself rather bogged down in a semantic argument about the precise translation of the Italian collective title) – and as soon as we have moved away from the Seasons the Avison Ensemble flexes its muscles in some superlative playing. With Beznosiuk's violin chattering away, 'La Tempesta di Mare' breaks out in waves of virtuosity and splashes of musical brilliance which is less a vivid musical portrait of a rough sea than a powerful display of superlative playing.

So it continues throughout the set, with this excellent UK-based ensemble showing why it is rapidly gaining respect as one of the finest period-instrument bands of our time, mercifully bereft of novelty factor or proselytizing zeal and offering up performances which are as entertaining, compelling and colourful as they are authoritative and polished. Among the more impressive moments is the richly nuanced opening movement of the Sixth Concerto ('Il Piacere'), with Beznosiuk making the journey up to his high register with the rest of the ensemble in

distinctly active support. Here is music which seems almost to live and breathe, so natural is the collective phrasing and dynamic shading.

The sound is good, although the Cambridge church in which it was recorded is perhaps a trifle boomy when it comes to dealing with the lower strings, and while white print on a green background makes for a distinctly user-unfriendly booklet, it is full of interesting writing from both Beznosiuk and Simon Fleming. A very impressive addition to the discography of this fine group, even if it does not always offer much that is distinctive in the field of recordings of Vivaldi's most famous music.

BBC RADIO 3 CD REVIEW

Andrew McGregor

24 October 2011

Now back to the Baroque for a recording of Vivaldi I've really enjoyed. If your heart sinks at the thought of another disc of the four seasons then here's a decent disc that presents those four famous concertos in context. The whole of Vivaldi's Opus 8; the twelve concertos he called the trial of harmony and invention from The Avison Ensemble led from the violin by Pavlo Beznosiuk. The Seasons are fine but there are so many joys in the rest of the concertos and Pavlo's favourite he says is No. 11 in D Major for its infectious Christmas morning clamour. Lovely, warm colourful playing.

MUSICWEB INTERNATIONAL

Brian Wilson

01 October 2011

It's hard to believe that until the Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra recording directed by Karl Münchinger was reduced from full price Decca to the Ace of Clubs label in the late 1950s, the Four Seasons were hardly known. Now we have a wealth of choice, not just for those first four concertos but for the whole Op.8 set, on period instruments and their modern equivalents, though usually, in the latter case, with a greater sense of baroque style than shown by Münchinger and his team. To deal with that latter category first, my admiration for the Academy of St Martin in the Fields team under Neville Marriner remains undiminished.

I recently compared two inexpensive period-instrument performances of The Seasons (John Holloway and Andrew Parrott, Dal Segno DSPRCD058), the complete Op.3 and Op.8 concertos (Fabio Biondi, Virgin Classics 6484082, 4 CDs) and a number of other recordings I set one benchmark there, which only Biondi observes to the letter, the barking dog in the slow movement of Spring, represented by the viola, which should sound insistent against the background of the sleeping herdsman: *sempre forte: si deve suonare sempre molto forte e strappato*. The Avison Ensemble also pass this test, if not quite as effectively as Biondi. In fact, if you're looking for something just a tad less overtly dramatic overall than Biondi or

Dantone (Op.8/1-6 Arts 47564-8 and Op.8/7-12 Arts 47565-8 - see review), this new Linn recording will do very nicely. The Biondi set offers superb value - a 4-CD set for around the price of a single CD - as do the Taverner Players and Andrew Parrott on a super-budget 2-CD Virgin Classics Veritas recording* - but the new Linn is also something of a bargain in that the complete Op.12 set, on two rather short CDs, is offered for the price of one, from £8 for mp3 up to £18.00 for Studio Master. I chose the 16-bit lossless (wma) which comes at £10 and found it excellent. This is another excellent recording to add to the distinguished list of the best available recordings; I shall certainly be returning to it frequently.

BBC RADIO 3 CD REVIEW

19 November 2011

Disc of the Week: 'Plenty of bold colours...recorded with immediacy and real presence on the Linn label.'

THE CONSORT

Michael Talbot

1 July 2012

Recording the concertos of Vivaldi's op.8 (1725), and especially the Four Seasons cycle that stand at the head of the collection, poses a severe challenge to any group aspiring to make its mark on the early music scene. Respect for what is known of authentic practice reduces the permissible interpretative options, yet the understandable desire to sound 'different' and even to claim an extra measure of authenticity in this or that detail necessarily works in the opposite direction. The situation becomes particularly acute when a complete collection that can be listened to in one sitting is presented to the listener, for here it becomes desirable not only to differentiate the group's interpretation from every other interpretation but also to individualise the interpretation of each constituent work, be it only through a different choice of continuo instruments, in order to prevent tedium.

The first novelty in this version by the Avison Ensemble is that a solo violin is retained throughout the twelve works. The ninth and twelfth concertos first saw life as oboe concertos - the absence of double-stopping and the restricted compass would allow one to guess this even without the verbal confirmation - and Vivaldi (or rather his Amsterdam publisher, Le Cène) duly mentions the oboe as an alternative solo instrument. Most recordings substitute oboe for violin, and the fact that Beznosiuk does not do so makes this recording unusual, though certainly not unique.

The second point of distinction is that this is an interpretation characterised overall by lyricism - indeed gentleness - rather than panache, even on the soloist's part. To this end, tempos are kept moderate, with the opportunity for subtle fluctuations, and immense attention is paid to the shaping of individual notes (some final notes and chords are gorgeously pampered). The effort pays off: this is a Vivaldi less

visceral than some, but more transparent and revealing of detail than most. Such avoidance of exaggeration may not seem in principle much of a virtue, but I find it a refreshing antidote to the power-driven, impulsive interpretations so common in Vivaldi performances today.

That said, there are some little things to murmur about. No two modern interpretations of the harpsichord realisation for the 'sleeping drunkards' movement in the slow movement of the Autumn concerto ever sound the same, and it is striking how few of these realisations do the obvious (i.e., something similar to violin parts, whenever the 'arpeggio' instruction appears), which is to devise a standardised broken-chord figure for the right hand that can be repeated, with notes smoothly changing to fit the harmony, over the full length of the passage.

Beznosiuk's harpsichordist, Roger Hamilton, begins by merely spreading the dotted-minim chords (not really what Vivaldi and his contemporaries mean by 'arpeggio'), then embarks on a swirling rhapsody that only towards the end coalesces into the kind of simple figuration he should have adopted from the start. I find Beznosiuk's ornamentation a little too imprecise in rhythm, although I applaud his skill at making improvised (or quasi-improvised) matter sound distinct, on account of its delicate quality, from the written notes. I think it was rash of him to ornament the solo line so fully in the slow movement of the Spring concerto, since this queers the pitch of the 'rustling leaves' figuration in the orchestral violins.

Here and there, I spotted some questionably inflected (or not inflected) notes. Since I have been a joint editor of *The Four Seasons* I am more aware than many of the minefield that baroque accidentals can constitute, the central problem lies in the retention (or not) of chromatic inflection after the first note bearing the accidental. 18th-century music is fairly consistent in applying certain ground rules - significantly different from the modern ones - but one always has to be extra-vigilant whenever composers such as Vivaldi, with his taste for bizarria, enter chromatic territory, since more than one musical solution is theoretically possible. Finally, I was puzzled by the non-observance of several 'piano' directions in the original engraved score, which I imagine survive in all modern editions. Such directions are not so common as to be that readily discounted.

All things considered, this is a version to recommend. It presents Vivaldi not as a freak of nature but as a civilised musician with a well-developed taste for the experimental. Congratulations too, to Simon Fleming for a very informative and thoughtful booklet essay mirroring the solid virtue of the performance.

CLASSICAL SOURCE

Graham Rogers

13 December 2011

It is incredible, although immensely popular in his own lifetime, that the name of Antonio Vivaldi all-but faded into obscurity after his death in 1741. Doubly

incredible because, following the rediscovery of his music in the 1950s, Vivaldi is now among the most well-known of all composers. He owes his universal fame to one work in particular – or rather, four works: a collection of violin concertos that depict, in vivid musical language, each of the seasons. The Four Seasons is one of the most recorded works ever – with versions in all manner of styles to suit every possible taste. Yet this doesn't dampen record companies' enthusiasm for churning out new recordings – but do we need them?

It is only possible to answer that in each instance. In the case of The Avison Ensemble, it is an emphatic 'yes' – especially as we are offered all twelve concertos which make up Vivaldi's magnificent Opus 8, grandly, if somewhat enigmatically, entitled "The Trial between Harmony and Invention". Under the direction of Pavlo Beznosiuk – who also takes the solo violin lines – these ingratiating performances are full of thoughtful and thought-provoking insight.

The North of England-based Avison Ensemble plays on period instruments, but those who are used to the pungent, even aggressive, cut-and-thrust of groups such as Fabio Biondi's Europa Galante may be surprised by this more refined sound. Beznosiuk's approach is instantly apparent in the first movements of 'Spring' and 'Autumn', with their relatively long note-values and smoother articulation than most historically-informed bands. Much of the playing is enchantingly beautiful, but also persuasively apt – subtle solo ornamentation in the second movement of 'Spring'; the marvellously pulsing orchestral build-up at the start of 'Winter'; and the sweetly lyrical solo in its second movement, effectively contrasted with the unusually energetic cello line and delicate pizzicato violins.

Beznosiuk is a sensitive soloist, not shy to take the limelight, but never one to hog it. And it soon becomes apparent that he and the Ensemble are also capable of the rawness and bite of other groups – but the musicians employ them more sparingly and, arguably, with stronger impact. You will be disappointed if you want the barking dog in 'Spring' to leap uncouthly from the texture; but the final movement of 'Winter' is ear-pinning in its intensity, and the conclusion of 'Autumn' has a visceral incisively-edged attack, infused with the pungent earthiness of percussively strumming lute.

The remaining eight concertos display the same characteristics. Highlights include Beznosiuk's extraordinary virtuosic displays over sustained pedal notes in the finale of No.8; the almost Bach-like sophistication of No.11 – the most substantial concerto in the set and Beznosiuk's favourite; and the unrestrained rustic joy of No.12. Occasionally a touch more flamboyance would be welcome, such as in the ebullient first movement of No.5, 'The Storm at Sea', which sounds more like a minor squall, but in general these are well-nuanced performances that will amply reward repeated listens.

We tend to take The Four Seasons for granted – music that is always around us – but if you haven't made the time to fully engage with its justly celebrated charms and startling originality recently, there is no better way to do so than

with this delightful set. The SACD sound is admirably well-balanced, clear and immediate.

AUDIOPHILE AUDITION

Steven Ritter

15 December 2011



The Four Seasons. The Four Seasons. The Four Seasons. Is there anyone in the world who hasn't at least heard of The Four Seasons? Its extreme popularity, the plethora of recordings, and its presence on a multitude of commercials and background scores to movies-its title even graced an Alan Alda film-make it most likely the best known piece of classical music in the world, and possibly the best known piece of music, period. It has been played on violin, flute, koto, sax quartet, trumpet, you name it, with versions ranging from full orchestra to string quartet. It sometimes uses one soloist, as on this recording, or four soloists (as on the Hogwood recording). It has been electronically reproduced and even has a choral version. The public fascination with this piece is simply amazing.

And I love it too. It endlessly entertains and sounds fresh as a daisy over and over. But it is only part of the story. Though it does contain a sonnet probably written by the composer himself (complete with cue marks in the score) in the style of John Milton, and is intended as a four-concerto unit, it is also the tip of a much larger iceberg called The Trial between Harmony and Invention, a series of twelve concertos that begins with The Four Seasons. Often the other concertos get overlooked when in fact several of them are the Season's equals, like the invigorating No. 5, The Storm at Sea. Two others retain titles as well: No. 6, "Pleasure", and No. 10, "The Hunt". The set also has one oboe concerto as well, though most often all are played on the violin. Each of these works is a beautiful composition and all are worthy of a devoted Vivaldi lover's attention.

The 13-member Avison Ensemble uses a middle-of-the-road approach not especially period instrument oriented like some others I am familiar with, that take rapid-fire tempos that border on the ludicrous and are so aggressively vigorous one is hard pressed to wonder where Vivaldi's poetry disappeared to. These in fact have the musical feeling of older, perhaps somewhat wiser (in many ways) takes on the music that emphasize the music first and mechanics second. Pavlo Beznosiuk is a fine player that offers a sincere take on these works, and looks back more to the violinists of the last century than to what is currently period doctrine. I found his recent readings of the Bach Sonatas and Partitas similarly done in this vein, with consequent pluses and minuses. These readings are slightly in the neutral zone, powerfully played but not as incisive and propulsive as say, the old Pinchas Zukerman recording on Sony Essential Classics, still one of the best out there.

Linn seems to favor a relatively resonant acoustic, and while I did not appreciate this on the Bach album it works much better here. I still prefer Lara St. John's recent

SACD recording on Ancalagon as best of breed, but as a Super Audio recording this one sits very well and is competitive with 95% of the others out there. Nicely done!

CLASSICSTODAY.COM

David Vernier

06 December 2011



During its 42-year, 17,162-performance original off-Broadway run, the *Fantasticks* made a lot of theatre history--and it also challenged the editors of the *New Yorker's* weekly theatre listings to come up with something new to say about the production after virtually everyone on earth already knew what the show was about. So, eventually they resorted to just randomly quoting lines from, oh, Shakespeare, the Declaration of Independence, the Gettysburg Address, weather reports, famous novels, etc.--anything to fill the space. The time is long past to award such treatment to reviews of Vivaldi's first four Op. 8 concertos, known to virtually every living creature with intelligence above the level of a grub, as *The Four Seasons*. How many recordings are there in the catalog? Perhaps not yet 17,162, but we're getting there.

However, with respect for the performers and producers of this excellent recording, I must say that if you somehow have managed to amass a classical CD collection without a single copy of these concertos (shame on you!), then this set--which expands the deservedly beloved *Four Seasons* to include all 12 (equally deserving) Op. 8 concertos--will serve you as well or better than any other in the catalog, ideally realized by the superb period-instrument Avison Ensemble and recorded in vibrant, extraordinarily detailed sound. Solo violinist/director Pavlo Beznosiuk is as formidable--and engaging--as any virtuoso who's ever tackled these challenging pieces, and his orchestra provides consistently first-class support. And now to my real review: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness..."

EARLY MUSIC REVIEW

Ian Graham-Jones

01 February 2012

Vivaldi's Op. 8 set of twelve concertos begins with *The Four Seasons*, but it is good to have the complete set of violin concertos in one box. On disc 1, the *Seasons* are followed by the excitingly evocative *Il Tempesta di Mare* and the pleasing *Il Piacere* featuring Pavlo Beznosiuk's virtuoso playing, while the second disc contains some of the less familiar concertos - all (except for *La Caccia*) without programmatic context - which contain some of the finest music of the Op. 8 set. Continuo is varied: Beznosiuk uses archlute or baroque guitar, harpsichord or organ in different concertos. The booklet has some useful brief notes and the complete texts of 'The

Seasons', though it is pity that it is printed white on green paper - not the best for those with eye problems.

BBC I

Graham Rogers

06 December 2011

A delightful new set which showcases The Four Seasons' startling originality.

Vivaldi's Four Seasons is one of the most recorded works of all time. Does the world really need another version? When the performances are as ingratiating and thoughtful as these, the answer is a definite yes. As extra enticement, The Avison Ensemble under the direction of soloist Pavlo Beznosuk offer not just the first four but all 12 violin concertos which make up Vivaldi's Op.8, "The trial between harmony and invention".

The north of England-based musicians play on period instruments, but listeners who are used to the visceral dynamism of groups such as Fabio Biondi's Europa Galante may be surprised by this more refined sound, characterised by relatively long note values and smooth articulation. The playing is enchanting, and almost always persuasively apt - try the subtle solo ornamentation in the second movement of Spring; the marvellously pulsing orchestral build-up at the start of Winter; and its lyrical second-movement solo, effectively contrasted with energetic cello line and delicate pizzicato violins.

Beznosuk is a sensitive soloist, not shy to take the limelight, but he never hogs it. He and his ensemble are capable of rawness and bite, but they employ them more sparingly than some groups - arguably with stronger impact. You will be disappointed if you want Vivaldi's depiction of the dog in Spring to snarl from the texture; but the final movement of Winter is ear-pinningly intense, and the conclusion of Autumn has a sharp-edged attack, infused with the earthiness of percussively strumming lute.

Highlights from the rest of the set include Beznosuk's impressive virtuosic displays in the finale of No.8; the almost Bach-like sophistication of No.11, the most substantial concerto in the set; and the rustic joy of No.12. Occasionally a touch more flamboyance would be welcome (the first movement of No.5, "The storm at sea", sounds more like a minor squall), but in general these well-nuanced performances are amply rewarding. The sound, on hybrid SACD, is well-balanced and clear.

We tend to take The Four Seasons for granted, but if you haven't fully engaged with its justly celebrated charms and startling originality recently, there is no better way to do so than with this delightful new set.

HALESOWEN NEWS

Kevin Bryan

03 March 2012

The Avison Ensemble add their name to the ever growing list of classical performers who've recorded Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" over the years as they unveil this thoughtfully crafted collection. The British period instrumentation specialists also tackle a further eight of the prolific Venetian's violin concertos as they breathe new life into the splendours of the Italian Baroque with all their familiar insight and attention to detail.

PIZZICATO

01 March 2012



WÄRM UND LICHT. 1725 veröffentlichte Antonio Vivaldi sein Opus8 'Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione' - eine Sammlung von 12 Concerti, darunter der Klassik-Dauerbrenner 'Die 4 Jahreszeiten'.

Nachdem die romantisierende Interpretationstradition des barocken Répertoires überwunden war und die historische Aufführungspraxis ihren Siegeszug angetreten hatte, ist man an schnittige, scharf akzentuierte, affektvolle Lektüren gewohnt.

Das britische Avison Ensemble geht einen anderen, nicht minder spannenden Weg. Vivaldis Musik klingt nach wie vor sehr klar und transparent, strahlt allerdings mehr Wärme und Licht aus. Der Dirigent des Ensembles, Pavlo Beznosiuk, setzt hörbar auf einen pastoralen Touch und zarte Poesie. Dennoch wirken die fast zwei Stunden mit Vivaldi immer erfrischend. Das wunderbar dynamisch artikulierende Ensemble lässt uns stets Neues erleben - und das macht diese Einspielung wirklich spannend und hörenswert.

BBC MUSIC

Martin Cotton

01 October 2012

Long gone are the days when the only concerto heard from this set of 12 were The Four Seasons' and this recording is the latest in a fairly long list. Like many of those, this rendition is played on period instruments, which have often come to mean strong attack, primary colours and sharply articulated phrasing. Not here. The Avison Ensemble takes a gentle approach, especially in the slow movements: the barking dog in 'Spring' is not in the least threatening and the movement conjures up a sleepy pastoral scene.

At the outset of 'Autumn', we hear long bows and sustained texture, quite unlike the sound that might come from *Il Giardino Armonico*, for example, and even 'Winter' is ingratiating rather than spiky. There is rhythmic vivacity in the outer movements of all the concertos, but Pavlo Beznosiuk has plainly chosen an approach that suits his naturally mellifluous style. There is little of the rubato that has become such a feature of Baroque playing, and the continuo is often unobtrusive. The relatively resonant recording smooths the edges even more.

AUDIOPHILIA

Andy Fawcett

09 July 2012

I still remember it just like it was yesterday! The year was 1986 and, while browsing a rack of vinyl, I happened upon an attractive-looking, black gatefold sleeve; the music was familiar, but the orchestra and record label were not. Suitably impressed that they went to the trouble of listing the microphones used for the recording, I bought it. The band was the Drotningholm Baroque Ensemble, the label BIS ... and the music was Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons'. What that small group of musicians achieved in managing to completely reinvigorate such an overplayed classic, to find so much more energy, drama, beauty and pathos in those familiar tunes than I have ever heard before or since, still astounds me to this day. However, BIS's CD transfers during the '80s could be extremely poor, so my search for a recommendable version on silver disc has been ongoing.

Performances on modern instruments I have rejected en masse - usually bludgeoned to death by oversized orchestras and slow tempos, none offered the essential nimbleness and piquant timbres of the small authenticist ensembles. One that I held out high hopes for was the 2000 recording by the extraordinary Giuliano Carmignola, with Andrea Marcon and the Venice Baroque (Sony SK90391). As much as I love their later series of discs premiering newly discovered Vivaldi concertos - whose robust physicality, extremes of light and shade and sense of high drama are unmistakably Italian - their *Four Seasons* was a substantial disappointment. Failing to capture the score's essential rustic flavours, and with some of the quicker movements apparently played as fast as is humanly possible, the subtlety and beauty of Vivaldi's uniquely vivid musical impressionism was not given its due.

For all of the many commercial recordings of the *Four Seasons* on offer, it is rare to find them offered in their proper historical context - as numbers 1-4 of twelve concertos published in 1725 as Vivaldi's *Opus 8*, "The Trial Between Harmony and Invention". Indeed, complete period instrument recordings of the other *Opus* numbers have also been few and far between; I purchased the first complete *Opus 9* ('*La Cetra*') on vinyl upon release in the late '80s, and I believe that *Opus 4* ('*La Stravaganza*') only became available in Rachel Podger's spectacular recording with *Arte dei Suonatori* in 2003 (CCS 19598). So, it was impossible not to be excited by this new disc from England's *Avison Ensemble*, led by the hugely experienced Pavlo Besnosiuk, which comes hot on the heels of their eye-opening recording of

Handel's Concerti Grossi Opus 6 (Linn CKD362). If they could carry over the passion and energy from that performance to the Vivaldi, we'd have a winner on our hands!

Strangely, though, I don't think they have. There is no real indication in the Four Seasons' movement timings, which are broadly in line with other recent recordings, and nothing to fault in the ensemble's playing or balance, yet I found the performance curiously four-square and lacking in adrenaline - somewhat "old-fashioned", if you like, when compared to the high octane playing typical of modern period instrument practice. These concertos mine so much of their essential character from the solo violin, and Pavlo Beznosiuk chooses not to stamp his personality on them; doesn't make them cry and leap and soar in the way that a handful of larger egos have managed! Others will take that as a positive, seeing in it a return to stylishness and musical values. Still, it's an argument that can wait, given that we're only a third of the way in!

It may be that the best-known Vivaldi concerto after these four is the similarly programmatic 'La Tempesta di Mare' ("Storm at Sea") ... and you're in luck, because that's up next as the fifth concerto of Opus 8 (though remembering that Baroque composers never expected these works to be performed all at once and in sequence). In one respect, it simply continues the musical exploration of nature's fury from 'Winter' - and furious it is, with its central largo offering an oasis of peace - yet it is also undeniably true that a piece of this stature is required to bring the listener back down to earth! Progressing through the remaining concertos on the second disc, I am increasingly struck by the constant flowering of harmonic inspiration and the sublime perfection of form that characterises all of Vivaldi's composition, and no less by the sumptuous splendour of Linn's recorded sound - clean and detailed, with just the right amount of warmth and ambience. Again, the musicians have opted to exercise a modicum of restraint in their playing, setting the feet tapping more so than the pulse racing, and certainly finding nothing in the scores to unsettle or confront the listener. It's a valid artistic decision and not something to get too hung up on - the net result is simply lovely.

There's no way to approach something as emotive as the Four Seasons in a dispassionate fashion, so I haven't been shy about wearing my prejudices on my sleeve. It is also true that many will not share them, while to others still they will be meaningless. From a loftier perch, what is undeniable is that we have here a beautifully packaged, beautifully recorded, finely played and thoroughly desirable release that places some of our best-loved music in its proper historical context. Indeed, I can't help but reflect that it would make the most perfect present for anyone with a musical bone in their body, whether an aficionado or someone who just "knows what they like" ... so if you find yourself on the horns of a gift-giver's dilemma, look no further.

FANFARE

01 March 2012

Antonio Vivaldi's op. 8 concertos, *Il Cimento dell'armonia e dell' inventione*, sound crisp and sharply etched in Linn's release of the entire set on SACD, but violinist

Pavlo Beznosiuk (playing a 1676 Matthys Hoffmans violin from Antwerp) and the Avison Ensemble offer a great deal more than simple crackle and pop in encrustations of ornamentation like those that make their appearance in the slow movement of "Spring" (as well as in that of "Summer"). These extra expressive elements include a rhythmic vitality that never expresses itself in extreme contrasts of tempo or dynamics that have become almost pro forma among period practitioners. Soloist and ensemble, in fact, take the opening movement of "Summer" at a gracious tempo that allows its birds to sing without being forced and its storms to contrast with the season's oppressive heat and humidity. Beznosiuk's restraint in the slow movement renders the calm before the last movement's storm all the more ominous, while the tempest itself never rages so fiercely that the instrumentalists lose their edge. "Autumn" begins with a more legato approach to the main tutti theme, which Beznosiuk extends to the solo's double-stopped version of the same motive. He doesn't eschew the work's pictorial aspects, as his rendering of drunken napping near the first movement's end and the death of the prey in the last movement's hunt demonstrate. Neither does the ensemble portray the opening of "Winter" in shockingly abrasive timbres to limn the season's bone-chilling cold. But he takes the slow movement of "Winter" at a quick tempo that helps free it from the Romanticism that can threaten to overwhelm it.

The ensemble's clean articulation in the opening of the fifth concerto, "La Tempesta di mare," allows individual lines to emerge from the gale-force passages despite the turbulence. Beznosiuk adds piquant decoration at the end of the slow movement, and the ensemble opens the finale vigorously. The sixth concerto also bears a title, "Il Piacere"; both violinist and ensemble create lift in the sunny passages of its first and third movements. The second movement provides them with a wider scope for interpretive subtlety, though their carefully calibrated effects in the finale demonstrate equally careful planning. The seventh concerto, which bears no title, originally dedicated to Johann Georg Pisendel, according to Simon D. I. Fleming's booklet notes, may not sound so virtuosic, but Beznosiuk and the ensemble play off the violin's melting line in the slow movement against its accompaniment. The eighth concerto's swirling figuration over pedal points in the third movement overcomes any perceived want of virtuosity in the seventh, and Beznosiuk is sensational rather than simply efficient in these extended passages. The ninth concerto, the solo part of which can also be played by an oboe, offers a suave contrast to the 10th, "La caccia," which extends the venereal scenes in "Autumn." Beznosiuk proves a sprightly hunter who stalks and strikes his prey with the precision of an archer rather than with the blunt force of a bludgeoner. The ensemble sounds equally starchy in the contrapuntal opening of the 11th concerto; a similar approach by Beznosiuk to the solo passages suggests not only lines double-stopped but a razor double-stopped. His lyricism in the slow movement mitigates this effect somewhat before the finale begins, again contrapuntally but this time more lushly in both tutti and solo parts. Beznosiuk plays the rapid figuration with pellucid lightness and ease. The reading of the 12th concerto overflows with good spirits in the first movement, bristles with effective ornament in the second, and ends with a genial smile in the finale.

Throughout, Beznosiuk produces a pinched sound, perhaps characteristic of gut strings but more pronounced than timbres associated with exponents of period instruments like Simon Standage and even Andrew Manze. Still, those who prefer the sound of modern instruments shouldn't be put off, since Beznosiuk plays with such expressive flexibility. Strongly recommended, in part because of the advantage that SACD sound confers.

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I'm glad the Avison Ensemble didn't stop at yet another recording of just the Four Seasons, choosing instead to give us the whole of Opus 8, which is really very fine. The notes here contain, at least implicitly, some good advice: we should occasionally sit down and really listen to the Four Seasons-difficult to do, bombarded as we are by the constant media use of at least fragments of these concertos. Nonetheless, it might be rewarding, especially if you listen in the context of the other eight concertos. To give you some idea of how seldom the entire 12 concertos are recorded, one online store has eight sets of all 12 but well over 200 recordings of Four Seasons.

I would be comfortable with this set as my only recording; it is an extremely solid reading of all the concertos. I have written at length before about my own categories of Four Seasons recordings (J/A 2011). There is nothing weird or far out about this performance. It's musical, energetic, and charming, evocative of the seasons without leaning toward the bizarre. The same is true for the other concertos. Don't hesitate to buy it if you need one or if you're dissatisfied with what you have. The notes are good, the sound excellent.