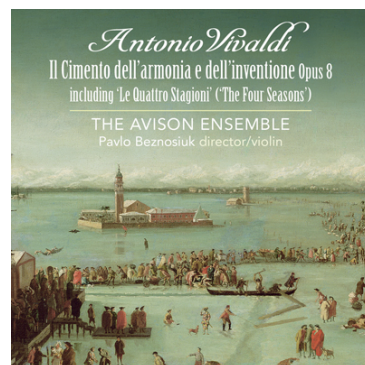


*reviews*

**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*

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**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.

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**Independent on Sunday**

**Anna Picard**

6 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.

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Alternating archlute and guitar and harpsichord and organ respectively, Paula Chateaufort and Roger Hamilton pinpoint the constant play of light central to Vivaldi's music. Delicious.

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### ***International Record Review***

**Marc Rochester**

1 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.

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***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.

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***MusicWeb International***

**Brian Wilson**

1 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

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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.

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**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.'

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**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

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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.

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### ***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!

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**ClassicsToday.com**

**David Vernier**

6 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..."

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**Early Music Review****Ian Graham-Jones**

1 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.

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**BBCi****Graham Rogers**

6 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 Beznosiuk 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.

Beznosiuk 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.

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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.

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### ***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.

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### ***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.

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