

Program Notes  
**Vivaldi Four Seasons**  
January 25, 2020

**Goldberg Variations, BWV 988**

**Arr. For String Orchestra by Dmitry Sitkovetsky**

Johann Sebastian Bach

1685-1750

Johann Sebastian Bach's so-called *Goldberg Variations* is among those great works that history has encrusted with myth, legend and misinformation. We all grew up learning that Bach composed this massive set of keyboard variations on commission from the insomniac Count Hermann Karl von Keyserlingk [spelling varies] to be performed for him as bedtime music by his talented harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg; that Bach was paid a small fortune by the grateful count (a golden goblet filled with a hundred *Louis d'Or*); and that the great work was written under duress since the composer disliked composing sets of variations. Colorful, but probably false.

The “*Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen vors Clavicimbal mit 2 Manualen*” (Aria with different Variations for the Harpsichord with 2 Manuals) forms Volume IV, the final volume of the *Clavier Übung* (keyboard practice). Together, the *Clavier Übung* series, published between 1731 and 1741, is a complete survey of the art of keyboard playing of the period.

The Aria, on which the variations are based, first appears in the hand of Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, under the title “Sarabande,” but the origin of the 32-bar figured bass is still not clear. The simple theme triggered in Bach the kind of reaction described in his obituary: “He needed only to have heard any theme to be aware – it seemed in the same instant – of almost every intricacy that artistry could produce in the treatment of it.”

Framed by the *Aria* at the beginning and end of the piece, the organization of the variations can be described as falling into two sections punctuated in the middle, at Variation 15, with an overture and fugue in the French style.

The final canon is a *quodlibet* (pastiche), combining the *Aria* with at least two popular tunes that fit its harmonic structure. In English, the two songs are titled: “Cabbage and beets have driven me away” and the less quirky “I have been away from you so long.” Suggestions of other ditties are also present, but no one seems to have identified them by name.

As with many other Bach works, information on the performance practices for the Variations is sparse. There are serious questions of tempi and of repeats – modern recorded performances range from less than 40 to over 90 minutes – with and without repeats.

In 1984, Dmitry Sitkovetsky arranged the *Goldberg Variation* for a string trio. Sitkovetsky writes: “When I first wrote my transcription of Bach’s Goldberg Variations for String Trio, in 1984, it was both a labor of love and an obsession with the 1981 Glenn Gould recording. For two months I probably had the time of my life, musically speaking, being in the constant company of Johann Sebastian Bach and Glenn Gould. Generally, at that time, transcriptions were out of fashion and I recall that my own colleagues and managers were skeptical about such an audacious idea.” He subsequently made a version for string orchestra, simplifying it, and with fewer repeats.

While there is a running argument as to whether a harpsichord or fortepiano is the more appropriate instrument under modern performance conditions, moving from a staccato keyboard instrument to legato strings, totally changes the texture of the music.

### ***Teen Murti***

Reena Esmail  
b. 1983

Chicago-born Indian-American composer Reena Esmail works between the worlds of Indian and Western classical music, and brings communities together through the creation of equitable musical spaces. Esmail holds degrees in composition from The Juilliard School and the Yale School of Music. She spent 2011-12 in India on a Fulbright-Nehru scholarship, studying Hindustani (North Indian) music.

“Most Indians will immediately recognize Teen Murti as name of the New Delhi residence of the first prime minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru. The residence, which now serves as an incredible cultural resource (library, museum, and planetarium) is named for the sculpture that stands in front of it. ‘Teen Murti’ means three statues, figures, or representations in Hindi. Though not directly based on the sculptures, this work shares their title as it is centered around three large musical ‘figures’ that are adjoined by short interludes – similar to the idea behind Mussorgsky’s *Pictures at an Exhibition*. It lays out three tableaux: each is rooted in a specific *raag* [raga] and its Hindustani melodic tradition, and those melodies are interwoven using a more Western technique.”

*Teen Murti* is in three sections played without pause, each based on a specific *raag* (*malkauns*, *basant*, *jog*). The *raags* themselves would be so familiar to Indian listeners that they would tend to hum along with the musicians. The Western and Eastern musical traditions share aspects of the same aesthetic including emphasis on contrasting tempi and rhythms, particularly syncopation in the fast sections. The Hindustani element are the use of drones, passages of slow, non-metric, improvisational-sounding writing, glissandi and the traditional melodic modes. On the Western side are the string orchestra itself, dissonant intervals and harmonies, modulation away from the Hindustani modes, and the fast-slow-fast arrangement of the three sections with extensive passages for orchestral soloists as in a concerto.

In an interview, Esmail remarked on the central, slow section as employing a *raag* that an Indian audience would associate with spring. Having started off her career composing in an American style, she sees the relationship of the final section (*jog*) as sounding like Aaron Copland.

***Concerto a cinque* for Oboe in B-flat major, Op. 7, No. 3**  
**Transcribed for trumpet**

Tomaso Albinoni  
1671-1751

Venetian composer Tomaso Albinoni's best known work is the *Adagio* in G minor – except for the fact that it is probably not by Albinoni! Remo Giazotto (1910-1998), an Italian musicologist and critic, claimed that the *Adagio* was based on a fragment of manuscript he had discovered in 1945 in the Dresden State Library while completing his biography of Albinoni and the catalogue of Albinoni's music. No one else recalls ever seeing the fragment, and Giazotto claimed that it was subsequently lost.

Albinoni's authentic compositions, including some 80 operas and stage works, 40 cantatas, as well as many chamber and orchestral compositions, have largely disappeared. A few, however, have gradually regained popularity, especially his concertos for oboe and the trio sonatas. J. S. Bach, who admired these sonatas, developed themes from four of them into fugues.

Less well-known – but nonetheless authentic – are the 12 *Concerti a cinque* Op. 7, published in Venice in 1715. Four are for violin, four for oboe and four for two oboes. “*A cinque*” refers to the makeup of the ensemble, or *ripieno*, accompanying the soloist (two violins, two violas, and cello – or multiples thereof).

During the Baroque period, instrumental scoring could be rather fluid. As long as a number of instruments could cover the same range and utilize comparable techniques, they could be interchanged. Thus, substituting the trumpet for the oboe represents a practice that Baroque composers would have found perfectly acceptable.

This short work is typical of the early Baroque solo concerto. By this time, the genre had solidified into the three-movement, fast-slow-fast structure that, for the most part, prevails to this day. In the first movement, Albinoni is particularly artful in handling irregular phrases, a device that avoids four-square monotony and propels the movement forward.

***The Four Seasons***

Antonio Vivaldi  
1678-1741

Antonio Vivaldi's four concertos, known as *The Four Seasons*, are part of a group of eight violin concertos published in Amsterdam in 1725 as Op. 8. They are also among the earliest examples of

program music: Vivaldi provided sonnets in Venetian dialect, probably his own, to head each of the four concertos, marking with capital letters sections of the sonnets and their corresponding music. It is clear from the detailed notes Vivaldi made on the score that he enjoyed composing these concertos as well as performing them.

### **Concerto in E major, Op. 8, No. 1, *Spring***

Setting the mood of the opening movement, the opening *ritornello* (recurrent phrase) is marked in the score “Spring has returned.” The first violin solo is marked “Song of the birds,” while after a return of the ritornello, comes a soft murmuring on the violin. After the next ritornello comes the lightning and thunder, followed by an extensive return to the singing birds and gaiety.

The slow movement is a musical description of the snoozing goatherd, watched over by his dog, whose bark is imitated throughout the movement on the violas with repeated notes to be played “very loud and abruptly.”

The third movement, a rustic dance, opens with a suggestion of rustic bagpipes, complete with an imitation of their drones by sustained notes on the low strings.

### **Concerto in G minor, Op. 8, No. 2, *Summer***

The opening phrases droop in sympathy with the suffering people. Suddenly the violin depicts the singing of the birds. The zephyr’s voice is heard gently on the violins and violas, interrupted by the wind squalls depicted by rapid scales on the violins and bursts by the entire ensemble. A lonely violin solo describes the weeping shepherd’s apprehension of an impending storm.

In the second movement, the shepherd’s rest (solo violin) is interrupted repeatedly by his fear of distant thunder (strong tremolo by the whole orchestra). He tries to sleep again, but the gnats and flies (repeated dotted notes on the strings accompanying the solo violin) don’t let him rest.

The third movement describes the violent storm, justifying the shepherd’s fears. Darting scales in the violins describe the lightning while the cellos and basses portray thunder.

### **Concerto in F major, Op. 8, No. 3, *Autumn***

The concerto begins with the rhythmic dances and songs of the peasants, followed by uncertain lurches by the solo violin to depict their drunkenness, which gets wilder and wilder, alternating with the dance music. With a sudden shift to *Larghetto*, some of the revelers go to sleep while the dances continue. In the second movement, the muted strings become increasingly gentle as the slumber becomes deeper and deeper.

Violins imitate the hunting calls in the third movement. A wild melee in the orchestra describes the confusion of the hunt, the fleeing prey and its death, with the strings imitating the baying dogs.

### **Concerto in F minor, Op. 8, No. 4, *Winter***

The strings, with trills in the violins, describe the shivering in the winter cold. Swift arpeggios and scales by the solo violin describe the horrid wind, while a series of abrupt chords suggest stamping feet and running to get warm. But rapid tremolos show that all this activity is useless, since the teeth continue to chatter.

Violin pizzicatos depict the falling raindrops, after which a warm melody on the solo violin describes the pleasant indoors with its roaring fire.

The finale opens with sliding phrases by the violin - walking and slipping on thin ice. The orchestra joins with a slower rhythm to indicate the hesitant steps and fear of falling. But then we are back indoors, enjoying the warmth while the winds howl outside.

### ***Spring from Cuatro estaciones porteñas* (The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires)**

Astor Piazzolla  
1921-1992

Written as four distinct works between 1964-1970, *Cuatro estaciones* were not originally intended to be performed as a suite, although in later years Piazzolla occasionally put them together to perform with his quintet. They were originally scored for violin, electric guitar, piano, bass, and bandoneón but have been transcribed for many instruments and instrument combinations. Finally, in the late 1990's, Russian composer Leonid Desyatnikov arranged all four seasons for violinist Gidon Kramer with string orchestra and solo violin.

While Piazzolla occasionally quotes Vivaldi (in "Summer" and especially in "Winter") Buenos Aires's climate is mild without the drastic seasonal fluctuations of Venice. The four movements of Piazzolla's suite describe the vagaries of human emotions rather than the weather.

Each of Piazzolla's Seasons is a single movement tango, although they all loosely follow an internal fast-slow-fast tempo pattern recalling the tempi of the Vivaldi's three movement concerti. In the improvisatory spirit of Piazzolla's original band, soloists sometimes add their own cadenzas. Listeners can also expect to hear some scrapes, squeaks, snaps and grunts that would have made poor Vivaldi blanch.

"*Primavera porteña*," has a Baroque flavor – although more in the style of Bach than Vivaldi. The solo violin begins with a theme, plus scratchy rhythmic additions, that is eventually joined by the solo cello in a contrapuntal duet before the movement takes off with the customarily rhythmic full orchestra accompaniment. A slow theme comprises the middle section of the movement. Note how Piazzolla patterns the pizzicato texture of the slow section to Vivaldi's style (here from "Winter") without actually quoting it.

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