

# Vivaldi's Four Seasons

**Start time:** 8pm

**Approximate running time:** 75 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

## Programme

**Arcangelo Corelli** Concerto Grosso No 1 in D major, Op 6

**Maria Grimani** Sinfonia to *Pallade e Marte*

**Arcangelo Corelli** Concerto Grosso No 2 in F major, Op 6

**Antonio Vivaldi** *The Four Seasons*

**Harriet Smith takes us through tonight's programme of Italian treasures.**

Today we get to experience arguably the best-known set of violin concertos ever written – *The Four Seasons* – alongside a composer whose music has almost entirely vanished from sight.

The life of the Italian composer Maria Grimani is so wreathed in mystery that we don't even know for certain when she died. She appears to have been born into a noble Venetian family and what we do know is that she spent periods of time in Vienna, where she was active during the reign of Charles VI and was one of the last of a series of female oratorio composers at the imperial court. Strikingly she was first-ever woman to have an opera produced there: *Pallade e Marte* was unveiled at the Vienna court theatre in celebration of the emperor's saint's day on 4 November 1713.

Maria Grimani's gifts, though, are self-evident even from the short sinfonia (overture) that opens *Pallade e Marte*. It ranges from a bustlingly upbeat opening section, strings supported by busy harpsichord continuo, to a slower-moving section full of sighing phrases and juicily biting harmonies. This in turn gives way to a more optimistic theme, underpinned by lilting rhythms that end the sinfonia in a mood of good humour.

Arcangelo Corelli was a generation older than Grimani and details of his earlier life are somewhat vague. He made his mark in Rome, however, where he'd moved by 1675. He was an outstanding violinist and made major developments in the genres of the concerto and the sonata. His influence is out of all proportion to the small number of works left to posterity.

The sheer quality of his composing shows through wonderfully in the 12 Concerti grossi, Op 6, of which we'll hear the first two pieces. (A concerto grosso is a work that features a group of instrumentalists who function as soloists.)

The brief opening movement of the first concerto sets off with all due solemnity before a bustling second one that alternates busyness with dramatic silences. The third has a stately gait, while the fourth enjoys irrepressibly high spirits, though underneath the energy we can still detect the courtly gait of the previous movement. A gently sighing Largo brings us into a minor key, with Corelli showing his genius for creating music from the simplest of building blocks. Shadows are banished in the faster-moving sixth movement, which reveals itself to be a brief but perfectly formed fugue. The Concerto grosso closes with a dancing Allegro.

The opening movement of the F major Concerto grosso is emotionally wide-ranging, from the ceremonial to a melting dip into the minor. The confident demeanour of the fugal Allegro that follows is shattered by a slow third movement, in which Corelli pulls us into the depths of despair. As the speed becomes more flowing the underlying harmonies remind us that there is no respite from the sadness, though this is ultimately overcome by an elegantly dancing final Allegro.

At the other end of the scale from Corelli's small legacy is that left by Antonio Vivaldi, whose sheer productivity has sometimes counted against him. There's no question that he took violin playing to a new level and the pupils of the Venetian Ospedale della Pietà, where Vivaldi spent most of his working life, were fortunate indeed. As a concerto composer he built on the legacy of figures such as Corelli and in turn influenced Tartini, J S Bach and Telemann.

When a work is as famous as Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons*, it's easy to take for granted its radical experimentalism. The accompanying sonnets, which Vivaldi had printed alongside the music, and which will be displayed as captions tonight, make explicit the images conjured in the concertos (the author is unknown but may be Vivaldi himself).

barbican

Each concerto conjures a different world and the range of moods and musical effects are so striking it seems impossible that the forces – solo violin, strings and continuo – are so modest. Listen out, for example, for the barking dog (the viola in the middle movement of 'Spring'), or, in the first movement of 'Summer', the calls of the cuckoo, turtledove and goldfinch, while in the same concerto's slow movement the buzzing gnats and flies disturb the heat of the day, the sense of ennui banished by a violent storm that Vivaldi whips up for the work's finale. 'Autumn' finds raucous peasants partying hard in the opening movement, while their alcoholic stupor is conjured with daring harmonic colours in the slow movement, the last movement bringing things back to life with a vigorous hunt. 'Winter' again inspires from Vivaldi music of extraordinary colouristic imagination, from the pre-Minimalistic chugging of the first movement (depicting the savagery of the cold), via the warm glow of the slow movement, to a finale which is introduced by an improvisatory-sounding solo violin before a thrilling evocation of wild storms viewed from the comfort of indoors.

© Harriet Smith

## Vivaldi's Four Seasons sonnets

Texts from Paul Everett, Vivaldi: the Four Seasons and Other Concertos, Op 8  
English language translation © Cambridge University Press 1996

### Spring

Spring has arrived merrily  
the birds hail her with happy song  
and, meanwhile, at the breath of the Zephyrs,  
the streams flow with a sweet murmur:

thunder and lightning, chosen to proclaim her,

come covering the sky with a black mantle,  
and then, when these fall silent, the little birds  
return once more to their melodious incantation:

and so, on the pleasant, flowery meadow,

to the welcome murmuring of fronds and trees,  
the goatherd sleeps with his trusty dog beside him.

To the festive sound of a shepherd's bagpipe,  
nymphs and shepherds dance beneath the beloved roof  
at the joyful appearance of spring.

### Summer

Beneath the harsh season inflamed by the sun,  
Man languishes, the flock languishes, and the pine tress burns;  
the cuckoo unleashes its voice and, as soon as it is heard,  
the turtle dove sings and the goldfinch too.

Sweet Zephyrus blows, but Boreas suddenly  
opens a dispute with his neighbour,  
and the shepherd weeps, for he fears  
a fierce storm looming – and his destiny;

the fear of lightning and fierce thunder  
and the furious swarm of flies and blowflies  
deprives his weary limbs of repose.

Oh alas! His fears are only too true.  
The sky thunders, flares and with hailstones  
severs the heads of the proud grain crops.

### Autumn

The peasant celebrates in dance and song  
the sweet pleasure of the rich harvest  
and, fired by Bacchus' liquor,  
many end their enjoyment in slumber.

The air, which fresher now, lends contentment,  
and the season which invites so many  
to the great pleasure of sweetest slumber,  
make each one abandon dance and song.

At the new dawn the hunters set out on the hunt  
with horns, guns and dogs.  
The wild beast flees, and they follow its track;  
already bewildered, and wearied by the great noise  
of the guns and dogs, wounded,  
it threatens weakly to escape, but, overwhelmed, dies.

### Winter

To shiver, frozen, amid icy snows,  
at the harsh wind's chill breath;  
to run, stamping one's feet at every moment;  
with one's teeth chattering on account of the excessive cold;

to pass the days of calm and contentment by the fireside  
while the rain outside drenches a hundred others;

to walk on the ice, and with slow steps  
to move about cautiously for fear of falling;

to go fast, slip, fall to the ground;  
to go on the ice again and run fast  
until the ice cracks and breaks open;

to hear, as they sally forth through the iron-clad gates,  
Sirocco, Boreas, and all the winds at war.  
This is winter, but of a kind to bring joy.

## Performers

**Rachel Podger** violin

**Richard Egarr** director & harpsichord

### Academy of Ancient Music

violin I

**Bojan Cicic**  
**Elizabeth MacCarthy**  
**Iona Davies**  
**Davina Clarke**  
**Sijie Chen**  
**Kinga Ujszászi**

viola

**Jane Rogers**  
**James Bowron**  
**James O'Toole**  
**Joanne Miller**

theorbo

**Kristiina Watt**

violin II

**Persephone Gibbs**  
**George Clifford**  
**William Thorp**  
**Stephen Pedder**  
**Emilia Benjamin**

cello

**Joseph Crouch**  
**Sarah McMahon**  
**Imogen Seth-Smith**

double bass

**Judith Evans**  
**Timothy Amherst**

**Ken Chalmers** surtitles

Co-produced by the Barbican and Academy of Ancient Music

The AAM is grateful for the support of this performance from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Culture Recovery Fund, awarded through Arts Council England.



The City of London  
Corporation is the founder  
and principal funder  
of the Barbican Centre