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BACH FESTIVAL REVIEW

Conductor, violinist add drama to 'Seasons'

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If I were asked to name four Baroque violin concertos that have the audience appeal of say, the 19th century concertos of Felix Mendelssohn or P.I. Tchaikovsky, I'd probably say "The Four Seasons," the set that Antonio Vivaldi published in 1725. And as delivered by violinist Sarah Chang on Thursday at the Hult Center, I'd have a pretty strong argument for choosing those.

As James McQuillen writes in his program notes, the pieces are "program music — Baroque tone poems, so to speak."

The 27-year-old celebrity violinist, who recently recorded "The Four Seasons" but whose extensive discography consists largely of romantic masterpieces (including the two above), delivered a powerful, no-holds-barred performance of Vivaldi's work, utilizing every opportunity to dramatize what the composer wished to depict in his musical score.

Conductor and keyboardist Nicholas McGegan, who might himself be considered a superstar within the world of early music performance, presided from the harpsichord over a pared-down Oregon Bach Festival Orchestra. Like the soloist, McGegan opted for a dramatic approach, and his ensemble played with confidence and surefire accuracy.

Supertitles above the stage translated the sonnets that Vivaldi wrote to accompany the concertos, but one hardly needed to read them to know what was going on. The birds' singing in "La Primavera," depicted by the soloist and by violinists Elizabeth Baker and Steve Scharf, made it obvious we were in the midst of spring.

Chang's languid, crystal-clear sound and effortless delivery in "L'Estate" gave me a feeling of pleasant torpor, until the storm arrived in concerto's finale ("Tempo impetuoso d'Estate"), which the violinist played with amazing brio.

It may have been 87 degrees and calm outside the Hult, but Chang brought brutal hibernal winds into Silva Hall with her tempestuous and superbly executed playing in "L'Inverno." All the while, McGegan and the festival orchestra offered a similarly vivid account of the winter scene.

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Two hundred years after the Baroque composer penned "The Four Seasons," another Italian, Ottorino Respighi, known for colorful tone poems such as "The Pines of Rome," reworked a handful of 18th century keyboard pieces to create a suite called "Gli Uccelli" ("The Birds").

It was clear that McGegan, now conducting from the podium, was there to have fun. Beginning with the first notes of the Preludio, the playing was ebullient and the music exploded with energy. Yet at all times, individual lines emerged clearly, and ensemble-work remained tight.

McGegan and the orchestra (now filled out with winds) practically dropped us into a chicken coop in "La Gallina" ("The Hen"), bringing out cackling grace notes (credit clarinetist Carey Bell), emphasizing syncopations and generally punching up the music. The conductor's facial expressions and body movements, seemed to say, "This music rocks!" — and it certainly did.

Not all of Respighi's birds are obstreperous: The five-movement suite also depicts the swan and nightingale, and these movements gave various principals, including oboist Allan Vogel, a chance to play with expressive lyricism.

The suite concludes with a delightful homage to the cuckoo. My only complaint here was the celesta's over-amplification, although the instrument was nicely played by Boris Kleiner.

Just as Respighi looked back to the Baroque to find musical material, Igor Stravinsky borrowed from some 18th century Italian composers to create his ballet, "Pulcinella."

Unlike his contemporary, the Russian composer went far beyond orchestrating the original pieces. He infused the work with unmistakable Stravinskian traits — piquant dissonances, heavily accented syncopations and unconventional, often humorous, scoring.

Here again, the playing was first class, but if McGegan's approach to "The Four Seasons" and "Gli Uccelli" was assertive and boisterous, his take on the suite from "Pulcinella" was downright rambunctious.

Some of the sections in the suite are positively comical, particularly the Vivo movement, which featured double bassist David Williamson and trombonist Aaron LaVere.

Other movements offered a chance for a number of the orchestra principals to shine, including oboist Allan Vogel, concertmaster Elizabeth Baker, and cellist Hans-Jakob Eschenburg in several of the movements, and at times, flutist Lorna McGhee, bassoonist Kenneth Munday, hornist Rick Todd and trumpeter Guy Few.

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