

Vivaldi & Beethoven
February 19, 2027

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Notes on the Program
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The Four Seasons, Op. 8, Nos. 1-4, from *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* [1725]

ANTONIO VIVALDI

Born March 4, 1678 in Venice, Italy
Died July 28, 1741 in Vienna, Austria

With a cushy job in his native Venice teaching violin at a school for orphaned girls (many of whom were really the illegitimate offspring of aristocrats), Vivaldi was able to use his talented students to test out and refine his compositions, especially his hundreds of trendsetting concertos that featured a soloist in front of an orchestra. In 1725, Vivaldi's publisher in Amsterdam released a set of twelve of those violin concertos under the title *Il cimento dell'armonia e dell'invenzione* (*The Contest Between Harmony and Invention*). Vivaldi named the first four concertos after the seasons, and he organized the musical ideas to correspond to descriptive sonnets.

The sonnets offered Vivaldi ample opportunities for word painting, like the “birds in joyous song” in the first movement of *Spring*, represented by trilling violin motives, countered later by thunder and lightning. The docile slow movement depicts a goatherd napping in a meadow, with the violas assigned the part of his barking dog. The finale introduces nymphs and shepherds dancing to bagpipes, a sound evoked in the droning accompaniments.

Summer brings the “heat of the burning sun,” matched by wilting musical figures. The soloist enters in the style of a cuckoo, with the distinctive two-note call embedded within constant bow-strokes. The arrival of a stiff wind from the north, bringing a squall, sends the movement into an agitated state. The slow movement depicts another nap, this one interrupted by the nuisance of gnats and flies and occasional peals of thunder. The finale unleashes the full force of the summer storm, the lines cascading down like sheets of rain.

Autumn begins with peasants dancing and drinking in celebration of the harvest, until they all settle into an inebriated slumber. The slow movement descends into the soundest sleep yet, with the soloist joining the muted strings in slow-moving phrases, leaving only the

harpsichord to decorate the harmonies with *ad libitum* arpeggios. The finale wakes for a hunt, complete with imitations of hunting horns and barking dogs.

Winter paints a scene of desolate cold and chattering teeth. The slow movement moves the scene to a cozy fire inside, while pizzicato raindrops continue to fall outside. Starting with hesitant, slippery steps on the ice, the finale builds to raging gusts of wind.

Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36 [1802]

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 1770 in Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 in Vienna, Austria

At the age of 21, Beethoven left his job playing viola in his hometown orchestra to study with the world-famous Joseph Haydn in Vienna. Haydn soon left town and passed his new student off to another teacher, but Beethoven stayed on in Vienna when he realized that he could build a career there as a freelance performer and teacher.

In his early years in Vienna, Beethoven shied away from Haydn's two signature genres: the symphony and the string quartet. The Symphony No. 1 that Beethoven finally introduced in 1800 proved that he could go toe-to-toe with his former teacher, and two years later he used Haydn's template as a platform for the Second Symphony that was even bolder and more extreme.

The backdrop for this pivotal symphony was a terrible change that was overtaking Beethoven in 1802, when his hearing loss progressed to the point that he could no longer hide it. He finished the Second Symphony while convalescing in Heiligenstadt, outside of Vienna, where he suffered in a nearly suicidal state of agony, as we know from an unsent letter to his brothers, found among his papers after his death.

Borrowing a feature found in many of Haydn's late symphonies, Beethoven's Second Symphony begins with a meaty introduction full of shifting rhythms, moody harmonies and jarring accents. The fast body of the first movement enters, conversely, with just a wisp of melody in the lower strings. Whereas Haydn loved the elegant dichotomy of *forte* and *piano* intensities, Beethoven's score heightens the contrast, calling for even louder *fortissimo* and even softer *pianissimo* dynamics.

The *Larghetto* slow movement contrasts the adventurous opening movement with music that is serene, tuneful and unabashedly beautiful. The melodic phrases introduced by the violins and answered by the clarinets stay within the sweet treble range of female singers, emphasizing the modest, songlike quality of the material.

Beethoven designated the third movement a scherzo (Italian for "joke"), his raucous answer to Haydn's mellower minuets. The running joke here is an echoing pattern in which the last repetition is shockingly robust.

In the finale, a decidedly rough and rude main theme provides much of the comedic fodder. Beethoven's craftiness is especially evident in the playful ways he works back to that snarling motive.

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