

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA REVIEW

Four Seasons, Two Centuries

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By Thomas Goss

Manner — that's the quality that held the disparate elements of this program together, that and the first-chair excellence of the members of the New Century Chamber Orchestra as they presented a cycle of musical seasons entitled "Time Past and Time Present" at Herbst Theater on Saturday night.

To present works as distant from each other in time and intent as Antonio Vivaldi's *Le Quattro Stagioni* (*The Four Seasons*) and John Cage's *Quartet in Four Parts* takes daring. To interlace them as this program did — with Cage's seasonally-inspired movements broken into separate expository episodes alongside complementary Vivaldi concertos — took something more, a virtuosity of interpretation that managed to forge a common ground between the two.

Just what Cage's middle-period meditation would have in common with the High Baroque is not apparent on the surface. For his quartet, Cage used a harmonic language rich in the dissonant intersections of simply stated tones, often lackadaisical in introduction. The dense clusters of tone called to mind Stravinsky's *Three Pieces* for string quartet, but less intentionally dull and claustrophobic. What tied it to Vivaldi, in the end, was its sense of intimacy and self-possession, deeply explored by a rotating quartet within the orchestra through which every member cycled, with the exception of the selected soloists.

Quiet, Hot Summer, Keenly Cold Winter

Cage unveiled a Summer of quiet, slow heat, with delicate harmonics wheezing softly along as if every breath were a torpid effort. The Autumn movement had a sense of aloneness, intertwined with the sharp bite of approaching chill as punctuation opposed cohesion. Winter was keen air, quiet caution. The soft interplay of perfect and diminished fifths called to mind the unbearable whiteness of winter light. But the idea lost its potency the longer it was drawn out, and that was quite a bit of time for the simplicity of this subject. Spring followed, a jolly, brief quodlibet hoe-down, somehow encapsulating the content of the previous movements.

The roll call of the New Century Chamber Orchestra suggests that any of the members might have stepped up in with ease and grace as soloist in a Baroque concerto. With players at this level, the role of soloist becomes a channel for the will of the group, a graciously supported leader among equals. In fact, the concert had rather a "family feel" to it, with one member reading off the sonnets embedded in the score of Vivaldi's Seasons as another played little snatches of theme from the appropriate programmatic moments.

The effect was at times like children's storytelling, at times like cabaret. The accumulation of introspective prepositional phrases in the Winter concerto seemed, when read aloud, to be a

missing page from the *I Ching*, particularly with the musical commentary. Each reading was followed immediately by an oration of the same sonnet in Italian by composer Luciano Chessa, whose dramatics won the crowd over, as he spit out the stanzas of an autumn hunt, trembled in the winter cold, and yanked off the bow tie to his tuxedo as he melted in the summer heat.

Two Gentle Seasons, Two Soloists

The two gentler seasons were divided between soloists Anna Presler and Candace Guirao. Guirao's playing had a carefree panache that only occasionally betrayed the center of the pitch. As the first soloist, she set the tone for the evening, pulling the ensemble along with her in the dancing opening of Autumn, directing the changes of tempo and mood masterfully with the motion of her bow and body. Harpsichordist Katherine Shao's thoughtful improvisations gave the eerie slow movement something to do with itself besides just be eerie chords. Then Guirao returned with true lusty heart to chase down the ending.

In the breaking of Spring, Guirao, Presler, and concertmaster Krista Bennion Feeney made the perfect trio of larks. Then Presler became her own perfect hailstorm of triplets in the errant crash of the middle development before larking back into the sunshine.

Perhaps reflecting her extensive experience as a chamber-music player with groups such as the Onyx Quartet, Presler's soloing style differed markedly from her colleagues'. Her sense of integration was never far from the formation of phrase, the interplay of solo line and ensemble. In this way she was perhaps the most authentic of the evening's three soloists, singing *with* rather than *over* the group in the sleepy middle movement, engendering a sense of collective joy in the group in the festive finale. Her tone had a sweetness and conviction that was consistent throughout, with a minor pinch of tone in the most bravura passages.

And For the Harsher Weather...

The complexities of Summer and Winter were reserved for Krista Bennion Feeney. As capable a director as she is a soloist, Feeney leads with gesture, twitch, and nod, but most tellingly with her eyes, transmitting more meaning in a quick glance than many an involved sweep of the conductorial arm. In the onset of Winter, she brought forth both fire and ice, letting the bobbing chords set the stage and then launching the group into a burst of cold, like a door blowing open in a blizzard.

The lyric comfort of the fireside was warm and human under her bow, albeit with a slight loss of presence between emotional peaks. She attacked the last movement with refreshing ferocity and velocity, seemingly unafraid to acknowledge the more aggressive nature to the *brioso* introduction, after which she led the group on a brilliant chase, with absolute precision at the coda.

Parboiled Doves & Weary Goldfinches

Feeney's birds were more passionate than springtime larks as she turned on the Summer heat. I could almost feel the beads of sweat dripping off the tail feathers of the forlorn cuckoos, the

parboiled doves, and the weary goldfinches. The soft breezes and weeping of the shepherd were emoted with ardency and pathos, and Feeney's storming in the finale was first-rate virtuosity.

But the most perfect moment of the concerto--indeed of the entire evening--came with the parched and stuttering middle movement, with the ensemble gasping tentatively as their leader sang with a restrained melancholy that was powerful in its subtleties. It was a symbol for the conception for the entire evening, that in the celebration and acceptance of contradictions, fresh and unimagined life could be breathed into the oldest of notions, the most shopworn of musical works. And with this band, these works did their work well.