

Programme Notes

Re-imagining an instrumental work for voices has precedence, of course. Some thirty years after composing *Adagio for Strings* Samuel Barber added the words of the *Agnus Dei* to his music, creating from the original strings piece an entirely new one for choir. Perhaps more common is for an adaptation to be made by someone other than the composer of the original work, for instance with the pop song *All By Myself* which is based on the slow movement of Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No.2* in C minor. So too with the hymn *I vow to thee, my country* which started life as a wordless melody within the Jupiter movement of *The Planets* by Holst. Jazz Sébastien Bach, the debut album by the 1960s Swingle Singers, comprised instrumental music by J.S. Bach ingeniously arranged by Ward Swingle for eight jazz-scattering vocalists with double bass and drums.

In all of these examples, the re-imagining in no way diminishes our respect for the original composition. On the contrary it offers a new perspective, for performer and listener alike, akin to a novel being turned into a play or film. So it was that I found myself pondering how Vivaldi's four violin concertos, published in 1725 as *The Four Seasons*, might fare as choral pieces. Having loved this music since I was young girl, I'd often had the thought that melodies as good as these deserve to be sung. With 2025 marking the 300th anniversary of this most famous of the so-called Red Priest's compositions, it seemed the perfect time to put pencil to manuscript paper and give it a go. Nine months later, *A Season to Sing* was born.

Sourcing the poems, hymn texts and Bible passages for each movement was an integral part of the process. It mattered to me that the words might sound as if they could have inspired the music, even though it was the other way round. This meant matching their rhythms, rhyme schemes, phrase lengths and cadences to Vivaldi's melodies whilst simultaneously enhancing the all-important programmatic depictions within the different seasons. Vivaldi's manuscript helpfully contains the Italian sonnets he wrote as the basis for his music. For the opening movement of *Winter*, I chose to adapt one of these sonnets, *L'Inverno*, to create a soundscape. This is followed by the only wordless movement of the piece which I arranged in homage to Ward Swingle, the founder of The Swingle Singers, who became a close friend during my tenure as the group's Musical Director. The remaining texts are from the Old Testament (*Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Psalms*, *Song of Solomon* and *Zechariah*), poems by two 19th-century English poets Emily Brontë and Eliza Cook, a hymn by Henry Alford and a Thomas Morley madrigal. It's an eclectic mix into which I added the words of *Ecclesiastes* 3:1-8 (beginning 'To every thing there is a season') and set them in two movements which serve as bookends to the twelve Vivaldi movements. My settings were written in a quasi-Baroque style with its pleasing circles of 5ths and melodic sequences.

As a performer of contemporary and avant-garde music, I relish opportunities to create sounds in ways beyond conventional singing. *A Season to Sing* contains many such passages for the choir, including a whistling bird chorus, the evocation of a storm with the use of body percussion, a bagpipe's drone and the call of the cuckoo, as well as half-whispered, staccato syllables and jaw-wobble shivers to portray a freezing cold winter. It is my hope that choirs of all kinds will have plenty of fun when rehearsing and performing this work and that audiences will enjoy hearing familiar music presented in a new way.

It was important to me from the outset that *A Season to Sing* be performable by upper voice choirs as well as by mixed voice choirs. Vivaldi famously spent much of his working life providing a first-class musical education to orphaned girls at the *Ospedale della Pietà* in Venice, teaching them everything from playing instruments and singing to copying and composing their own music. Whereas boys were apprenticed out from the age of

10 to learn a trade, girls remained at the orphanage and those who were selected for musical training formed instrumental ensembles and choirs. Their all-female concerts were a major tourist attraction in Venice at the time, drawing the attention of royalty and nobility, and many of his pupils went on to become professional musicians. Vivaldi composed his Gloria for the Pietà choir and it is widely believed that it was his pupil Anna Maria della Pietà, an exceptional violinist, who inspired him to compose The Four Seasons. Knowing that Vivaldi was a fellow champion of female musicians makes me respect him all the more.

I am indebted to the fifty-five choirs around the world who co-commissioned A Season to Sing, several of which are upper voice choirs, and grateful to the Royal School of Church Music for inviting me to compose this my first full-scale choral work. Finally, I offer a deep bow to Antonio Vivaldi whose extraordinary music, which sounds as fresh today as it must have done 300 years ago, captured my imagination and inspired me to compose this piece.

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