The joyful and vivacious melodies of Antonio Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons (Le quattro stagioni)” have become so world-famous that it is difficult to imagine that this masterpiece was virtually unknown before violinist Louis Kaufman (1905-1994) recorded it in 1947 with the Concert Hall String Orchestra. Following his energetic and scintillating recording that brought “The Four Seasons” literally to life, Kaufman performed the masterpiece in numerous concerts in the US and abroad and also traveled far and wide to “discover” many more of Vivaldi’s works buried in various locations in Europe. One can safely say that Kaufman’s 1947 recording—which was the first integral and complete recording of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons”—marked the beginning of Vivaldi’s modern fame that we all appreciate today.

It all started in the fall of 1947 when Louis Kaufman was asked by CBS music director James Fassett to learn and broadcast Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” concerti the following spring. Kaufman was then a professional violinist who had completed his studies at Juilliard (then Institute of Musical Art), won the Naumburg Award in violin in 1928, and moved on to performing solos for the movies of Hollywood’s Golden Era in 1934. In fact, Kaufman’s career in Hollywood started unexpectedly when the famous director Ernst Lubitsch heard him on a radio show and offered him a double salary to play solos for “The Merry Widow” (1934) starring Maurice Chevalier. Lubitsch had just tried all the violinists at MGM and did not like any of them. By 1947, Kaufman’s golden violin playing had graced the silver screen countless times—his solos in such renowned films as “Gone with the Wind” (1939), “Casablanca” (1942), “Now, Voyager” (1942), “Intermezzo” (1939), and “The Adventures of Robin Hood” (1938) lent romantic aura that surreptitiously sealed the films’ success. Over the course of several decades, Kaufman played in

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1 The 1947 Kaufman recording of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons – from the LP Record CHS-1001 issued in 1950 (US) – is available for listening, as of August 2022, on the Internet Archives at https://archive.org/details/lp_the-four-seasons-le-quattro-stagioni_antonio-vivaldi-louis-kaufman-henry-swobod
more than 400 film scores. While Kaufman continued to concertize throughout his Hollywood years and was thoroughly versed in the classical repertoire, Vivaldi concerti were unknown to him when CBS’s Jim Fassett proposed them. Without having seen the score, Kaufman consented to learn “The Four Seasons.” Two days later, when Samuel Josefowitz of Concert Hall Records happened to ask Kaufman for some solo concerti that he could record, Kaufman proposed “The Four Seasons.” Kaufman received the score in the mail the day before he boarded the train to New York and learned the piece en route, falling “under the spell of Vivaldi’s music” that expressed so much “clarity, joy, and vivacity.”

The fated recording that would reintroduce Vivaldi to the 20th century audience was taped in the last four days of 1947 at Carnegie Hall, with each session starting at midnight and ending at 4am. The venue was overbooked for recording because of the impending union strike that would ban all recordings after December 31, 1947 due to disputes over royalty payments. On top of the formidable schedule, harpsichordist Edith Weissmann had to transport her valuable harpsichord—all wrapped up in silk scarves and wool blankets—to Carnegie Hall in New York City’s snowy traffic. Organist Edouard Nies-Berger also nervously anticipated pitch problems for Carnegie Hall’s organ due to the unexpected cold weather. All in all, luck was on their side, and Kaufman and the Concert Hall String Orchestra conducted by Henry Swoboda successfully completed the recording at four o’clock in the morning on December 31, 1947. Kaufman went back to his hotel at 6am completely exhausted, “with the melodies and captivating rhythms of Vivaldi dancing through our minds.”

The recording company, Concert Hall Records, specialized in unusual repertoire in those years and had therefore welcomed Kaufman’s proposal to record Vivaldi’s concerti. What an impressive irony, then, that “The Four Seasons” ceased to belong to that “unusual” and unknown category the moment the world heard it! Many unknown works and composers have been given a chance but in vain; such an ordinary fate would not befall real masters like Vivaldi. Talent cannot be pushed into oblivion—it thrives in history only because people naturally seek goodness and sincerity.

Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) was an Italy-born composer and master violinist who became a priest in 1703 and spent many years teaching and composing at Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, a school for orphaned and abandoned girls—who, thanks to Vivaldi, became domestically and internationally renowned singers and instrumentalists. In spite of Vivaldi’s pivotal role at the school, its ungrateful and ordinary board members prematurely fired him in 1709; his year-long absence, however, only made them realize their short-sightedness and led to his re-hiring in 1711. Despite his frequent travels starting in 1718, he continued to work for the school when he was back in Venice; and he came back to the school more permanently in 1723. Around this time, Vivaldi was receiving commissions from members of the European royalty and nobility, including the French ambassador’s commission for serenata “La Gloria e Imeneo” to celebrate Louis XV’s marriage in 1725. In 1740, Ospedale della Pietà failed to renew his contract—whereupon Vivaldi was invited to Vienna by Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI (1685-1740). Unfortunately, the emperor died that year, succeeded by his daughter Maria Teresia—mother of Marie Antoinette—who apparently did not have the sagacity or perspicacity to act upon her late father’s great admiration for Vivaldi, and Vivaldi died the following year in 1741 in Vienna. French writer and politician Charles de Brosses who came to know Vivaldi while visiting Venice

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4 See Kaufman, A Fiddler’s Tale, 189. The American Federation of Musicians recording ban in 1948 lasted eleven months.
5 Kaufman, A Fiddler’s Tale, 195.
in 1739—thus shortly before Vivaldi left for Vienna—marveled at the aging composer’s prodigious output, noting that Vivaldi is “known to compose a concerto with all its parts faster than a copyist could copy it.”

“The Four Seasons” are four concerti for violin and string orchestra—with each concerto of three movements representing a season: Spring, Summer, Autumn, and Winter. Vivaldi wrote these concerti sometime between 1718 and 1720, according to musicologist Alfred Einstein who wrote the notes for the 1947 recording. Interestingly, “The Four Seasons” represent only the first four of the total set of 12 concerti. The entire set was published as Opus 8, “Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’inventione” (“The Conflict between Harmony and Invention”) in Amsterdam by Michel-Charles Le Cène in 1725. “The Four Seasons” belong to the genre of “program” or programmatic music in that music is set to scenes or stories, as epitomized later by Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony. However, Vivaldi not only created music to depict seasonal characteristics like chirping of various species of birds, thunderstorms, and hunting dances; but he also literally wrote a “Sonetto Dimostrativo” for each season. These sonnets were printed in entirety in the Solo Violin part preceding the music, and they were also written on the music between staff lines in every part. Kaufman was certain that Vivaldi himself wrote these charming sonnets, “for his music illustrated them most effectively”; Alfred Einstein arrived at the same conviction but for a different reason: “because they are not lyrical masterworks” and “because they are written from the point of view of the composer.” The original 1725 edition encompassed individual parts but no score because the standards were considerably higher back then: “The eighteenth-century conductor was also solo violinist and composer, leading from his original handwritten score.” Vivaldi most likely performed the solo given his reputation as a violin virtuoso with eye-opening technical mastery. Kaufman was elated when he finally located the original 1725 edition of Opus 8 that included “The Four Seasons” at the Royal Music Conservatory of Brussels Library after an arduous search crisscrossing Europe in the late 1940s. He printed a translation—perhaps his own—of “The Four Seasons” sonnets in his posthumously published autobiography, “A Fiddler’s Tale: How Hollywood and Vivaldi Discovered Me.” Although Vivaldi’s unforgettable melodies and harmonies from his “Four Seasons” do not need the help of any words for expression, the sonnets reveal his beautiful thoughts.

Kaufman’s 1947 recording of “The Four Seasons” was issued many times in the US and abroad. He won the Grand Prix du Disques in 1950 for this very recording. Captivated by Vivaldi’s

7 See Alfred Einstein’s notes in Appendix 3: Cover and Notes of LP Record CHS-1001 – a 1950 reissue of the 1947 Kaufman recording of Vivaldi Four Seasons.
8 Kaufman’s own translation of the Opus 8 title, in Kaufman, A Fiddler’s Tale, 195.
10 Kaufman, A Fiddler’s Tale, 225.
11 See Alfred Einstein’s notes for LP Record CHS-1001 in Appendix 3.
12 Kaufman, A Fiddler’s Tale, 221.
13 See Appendix 1 for the translated sonnets as they appear in Kaufman, A Fiddler’s Tale, 225-227.
“Four Seasons,” Louis Kaufman not only located and performed the rest of Opus 8—the remaining eight concerti following “The Four Seasons” but also recorded Vivaldi’s other works, including two more sets of twelve concerti: Opus 3, “L’estro armonico” (The Harmonic Inspiration) published in 1711 in Amsterdam; and Opus 9, “La Cetra” (Lyre) published in 1727 in Amsterdam which was dedicated to his fan Holy Roman Emperor Charles VI who met Vivaldi in Trieste in 1828.

Kaufman’s passion for Vivaldi is conveyed throughout his autobiography, but his innermost passion for all the classical masters is expressed most touchingly in his unedited interview conducted on September 13, 1991:

Composers in a mysterious way always tell the truth, and maybe that’s why we are attracted to them. [...] Composers – Bach, Schubert, Beethoven, and some of the later ones--they have something profound that links them to the great ethical line of, call it religion, call it a higher order…a distillation of very high thought and very high principles…. [...] Even the ordinary person who has no knowledge of music feels it through the melodic phrases…marvelously worked out and expressed.

Kaufman’s crystalline violin sound and honest phrasings in his vivacious performance of “The Four Seasons” are testament to his faith in Vivaldi and in classical music in general. Kaufman—who went through the strict discipline of violin studies with Franz Kneisel who had known Brahms; who played chamber music and mingled with Fritz Kreisler and Jascha Heifetz; and who contributed to the iconic Golden Age of Hollywood—was no fake or cheap classical musician. Kaufman said that performers who do “these knee-bends and all kinds of so-called spectacular things…that’s nonsense. You must let the music speak for itself. And I think the ideal attitude toward performance, I always thought, was that of Jascha [Heifetz],” whose recordings “sizzle with the marvelous romanticism and intensity which is magnificent.”

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14 Of the twelve concerti in Vivaldi’s Opus 8, the first four are The Four Seasons with sonnets. The fifth, sixth, and the tenth concerti are also programmatic works with descriptive titles but no sonnets:
V. The Sea Storm (“Il Tempesta di Mare”); VI. The Delight (Il Piacere); and X. The Hunt (La Caccia). The remaining concerti have no titles. While all twelve concerti are written for solo violin with orchestra, the ninth and the twelfth concerti indicate that the solo can also be played by an oboe. See Antonio Vivaldi, Opus 8 “Il cimento dell’armonia e dell’inventione” published in Amsterdam by Michel-Charles Le Cène in 1725 (First Edition) - Solo Violin Part.
15 Unedited interview of Louis and Annette Kaufman by Harvey Herman for the CBS television program Sum and Substance, September 13, 1991. https://lccn.loc.gov/94705290 The author would like to thank both the CBS for granting free access to screen this interview and Cary O’Dell of the Library of Congress for materializing this access. While Kaufman’s autobiography A Fiddler’s Tale has sufficient and valuable information on all the technical details of his journey to ‘re-discover’ Vivaldi, the book was published nine years after his death with the final publication issued by his wife alone. In the CBS interview, Annette Kaufman herself states in Louis Kaufman’s presence that her husband tends to be “flowery” in language and they had to cut much language from the not-yet-published autobiography. Louis Kaufman also talks of his wife Annette as being very meticulous in detail, keeping all the contacts (“phone numbers”) and presumably travel details. Consistent with their own claims, A Fiddler’s Tale oftentimes falls into a mundane and minutious travel log and excludes expressions of Louis Kaufman’s musical faith – of spiritual nature expressed in his own passionate style – that comes across in his CBS interview of 1991.
Thanks to fate and Kaufman’s talent and tireless efforts, Vivaldi was “restored” to the modern audience after centuries of oblivion. The story is somewhat reminiscent of the “re-discovery” of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) by Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): Mendelssohn’s first deed to popularize Bach was to perform Bach’s St. Matthew’s Passion in 1829. For Bach’s contemporary Vivaldi, it took a century more; but once any Sleeping Beauty awakes, everyone lives happily ever after.

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18 For details on Mendelssohn and Bach, see “Felix Mendelssohn: Reviving the Works of J.S. Bach.” https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200156436/
Appendix 1: Vivaldi’s Four Seasons Sonnets


Spring

Spring is here, and full of happiness.
The birds salute her with their lilting song,
All fountains flow at the warm breadth
of little breezes, softly murmuring.
Now come, mantling the sky in cloak of black
Lightning and thunder, to announce the Spring
While following these, again little birds
Return to make melodious enchantment:
And so, upon the pleasant flowering meadow
With tender whispering of leaf and branch
The goatherd sleeps, beside his faithful dog.
While to the festive sound of Shepherd’s pipe
A shining apparition, Nymph and Shepherd
Dance on the beloved roof of Spring.

Summer

Under the harsh, hot season, the man droops.
The herd is languid, and the pine tree burns,
The cuckoo showers its notes upon the air,
Soon sings the turtledove, and the little finch.
Come sweet Zephyr, but contending brusquely
Comes North Wind close beside.
The shepherd weeps because he fears
The fierce North Storm and his own fate;
Snatched from his weary limbs is all repose
By fearful lightning and thunder’s roll
and angry flight of gnats and flies.
Ah, more’s the pity, all his fears come true:
A thundering sky, with thunderbolts and hail
Beheads the trees, crumples the grain.

Autumn

Country lads enjoy with songs and dances
The happy fortunes of abundant harvest.
When they’ve had their fill of Bacchus’s cup,
The merry feast ends with all guests sleeping.
It summons lively chatter, dancing, song,
This pleasure-giving, temperate Autumn air,
This season which invites us to sweetest sleep
And wakes from sleep to even sweeter pleasure.
Forth go the hunters to chase at dawn
with horns, with guns, with staffs to beat the woods.
Before them flee the game whose tracks they follow.
Now frightened, wearied of the deafening noises
of muskets, beaters, wounded now as well,
The poor beast, spent with running, sinks and dies.

Winter

Frozen, shivering in the snowy cold
Under the harsh blows of a fearful wind,
Stamping your feet again and again and running
All in a world of ice, with chattering teeth,
Spending the days quietly, content by the fire,
While others go out of doors in the pouring rain,
Or walking upon the ice with cautious step,
Slowly, carefully, in fear of falling;
Then stepping out strongly, slipping, falling at last,
To scramble up once more and running hard
To race, while the cracking ice breaks, gaping wide
To hear bursting through door of iron, the winds,
The South, North Wind, all the Winds at War.
This is Winter. And yet, what joy it brings.
Appendix 2:
First Page of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” Solo Violin Part from the Opus 8
First Edition Published in Amsterdam in 1725 by Michel-Charles Le Cène
Appendix 3:
Cover and Notes of LP Record CHS-1001
–a 1950 reissue (US) of the 1947 Kaufman recording of Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons”

The cover and notes of the vinyl record CHS-1001 is available for viewing below and also on the Internet Archives, as of August 2022, at https://ia804509.us.archive.org/19/items/lp_the-four-seasons-le-quattro-stagioni_antonio-vivaldi-louis-kaufman-henry-swobod/lp_the-four-seasons-le-quattro-stagioni_antonio-vivaldi-louis-kaufman-henry-swobod.pdf.
ANTONIO VIVALDI - CONCERTI DELLE STAGIONI (THE FOUR SEASONS)

Louis Kaufman, violinist; Edouard Nies-Berger, organist; Edith Weiss-Mann, harpsichordist
and the Concert Hall Society String Orchestra Conducted by Henry Swoboda

Antonio Vivaldi’s fame suffered a strange fate. His death passed unnoted, and in his own country he was almost completely forgotten for nearly a hundred years. He was one of the most prolific composers of his time, a most refined musician, a daring experimenter, a great virtuoso, an inventor of unheard-of sonorities, and an important precursor of the creators of the new orchestral forms of the Eighteenth Century. And he belongs, especially with his Four Seasons, among the fathers of descriptive or “program” music.

Early in life, in 1700, he took the tonsure and became a priest in 1703. In the same year he became maestro di violino and maestro dei concerti at the Bennuten of the Ospedale della Pieta, the most famous and eminent of the four Venetian conservatories for women, all renowned of great stages and instrumen
talists, praised by all contemporaries, Italian and foreign. It was for his performance of his pupils that Vivaldi wrote his sonatas and concertos, of which twelve (or thirteen) collections were printed during his lifetime, published not in Italy but in Amsterdam or Paris. If these were included more than a hundred works, and to them we must add a bulk of concertos, cantatas, operas, oratorios and music for the church, which remained in manuscript. In about 1733 Vivaldi entered the field of the opera and did not abandon it until his last years. His reputation with the opera not only brought him into dangerous contact with prima donnas—especially for a priest—but also brought him the patronage of his employer Benedetto Marcello, whose suite II introito alla mi dei is directed mostly against certain innovations of Vivaldi.

The Four Seasons (Le quattro stagioni) is a group of four concertos for violin and string orchestra. What happens in each of the four concertos is quite unusual indeed in musical content and virtuoso virtuosity. There is a strange mixture of patriotic passion and patriotic symbolism—wondering of the birds, thunderstorms, hunting, dancing of peasants, the adventures of skating, etc., but all of it seen “through a mirror.” Here is a whole horde of nature and musical charming illustration and, in many respects, the prototype of programmatic music which reached its Gedaehn in Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony.

It must be here between 1718 and 1721 that Vivaldi composed the twelve concertos which, in the latter year, were published by Le Cine in Amsterdam as an opus with the title Il concertino all’aria e all’inventione:—a characteristic title which hints, at the same time, at both the experimental spirit of the work and its “perfection,” its blending of daring invention and harmonious solution. The concertino contains not only Le quattro stagioni but also other descriptive or programmatic works II tempesta di mare (The Sea Storm), II tempesta in monte (The Hunt), while the five others lack a program. All are concertos for violin and string orchestra.

The program description of the four seasons is nothing new in Italian music. We may remember the four madrigals which open the Second Book of five-part madrigals by Giovanni Nason (1557), a Netherlandish composer, in the service of a Vous, “in the Venetian style,” “in the tune of Taddeo Fiducia:—to the primarius.” The four main sections (the seasons). If Vivaldi hardly knows the music of Nason, it is not improbable that he know Fiducia’s famous Maccaronie. It is hardly to understand, however, that Vivaldi the drudged player should get a role, and in both cases in the Seasons. We may remember, Furthermore, another work of five-part madrigals, I dispetto della cella in opus a quin
to egopie quattro concerto (1601), set to music by five great composers of the time, G. M. Nanino, G. Croce, I. Boccaccio, L. Bertoni and Filippo di Monti.

This, however, is verbal music. The field of instrumental music Vivaldi enters first indeed by to illustrate the seasons—the model for so many imitations. He, too, did not renounce the word completely. His music is based on four seasons by an unknown poet, perhaps by himself, because they certainly are no lyrical masterpieces. It is indispensable to know them in the original.

Vivaldi follows his program closely. If we believe him to be the author of the sonatas it is certain that they are written from the point of view of the composer. Vivaldi keeps faithfully to the form of the violin concertino in which two fast movements of different characters enclose a slow one. The description, the “program,” allows him only a fewer, bold and more unusual inventions within the conventional frame.

La Primavera (Spring) is depicted in its first movement, E major, by a festivity of peasants in the open air (Tutti). First they listen in enraptured silence to a charming concertino of birds (three violin solos), then to the ‘sweet melody’ of the river. Then comes a short thunderstorm, in which the solo violin takes the role of lightning. Soon, however, the birds start to sing again and the movement ends in full sunshine. In the second movement in C sharp minor, the shepherd is asleep and dreams in the sun while one hears the rippling of the brook, the humming of the bees. It is one of the broad and powerful ‘Largos’ in which Vivaldi wins with his great contemporary Handel. The last movement is a pastoral dance of nymphs and shepherds to the sound of the bagpipe. Sometimes one, sometimes a group of dancers perform graceful variations.

L’estate (Summer) is for the Italian violinist the time of oppressive heat (first movement, G minor, Andantino molto). One hardly drows to move (Tutti): hot and time (Allegro) one is comforted by the repeated call of the canons, the wind, the whispering of the goldfinch. First Dolly blows sweetly but then Borea, the north wind, intercepts him gruffly and re
makes the shepherd of the path to his crop. The second movement (G minor, Adagio) portrays the anxiety of the shepherd, even during his rest he is vexed by his boys. And also, his apprehensions are justified. A thunderstorm with lightning and thunderstorm destroys all his hopes (Allegro, Presto). It is a most brilliant movement, with a wealth of virtuoso invention and expression.

L’autunno (Fall) is in the key of F major. In the first movement (Allegro), the peasant celebrates the harvest with rustic dances and songs, and abundant drinking—with the usual results, most wildly symbolised in soil and suit! One of the results is thunder—the Larghetto episode in F minor. In the second movement (Adagio, 4 minor) the sleeper has an alarming dream. The last movement (Alllegro) is a picture of hunting—shooting, pulling and rejilging—the model for so many “hunts” in instrumental and especially orchestral music.

L’inverno (Winter) is astonishingly northern. There is a description of an icy scene (4 minor, Allegro molto con fuoco) with all the signs of biting cold, fast stamping, teeth chattering. But there is also (second movement, Largo E flat major) rest and comfort: quiet days in front of the tapestry (Violin solo) while it is raining outside (pluvioso in the orchestra). The last move
tment (Alllegro) is a picture of a skating party, filled with adventures, falling, breaking through the ice, and the blowing of a horn.

ALFRED EINSTEIN

Louis Kaufman has been acclaimed as a “violinist’s violinist” and one of the leading exponents of his instrument in the world. He is a master of the solo violin and with outstanding orchestras throughout the United States and Europe. Noted for his astonishing, searing and soaring phrasings, he is regarded as one of the world’s foremost authorities on the works of Vivaldi.

EDOUARD NIES-BERGER, a Frenchman by birth, is an internationally known organ virtuoso. Head of the organ department of Peabody Conservato
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*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.